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ON THE BOUNDARIES OF  
THEOLOGICAL TOLERANCE  
IN ISLAM

***Studies in Islamic Philosophy***

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*Studies in Islamic Philosophy*

General Editor: S. Nomanul Haq

VOLUME I

# ON THE BOUNDARIES OF THEOLOGICAL TOLERANCE IN ISLAM

ABŪ ḤĀMID AL-GHĀZALĪ'S

*Fayṣal al-Tafriqa*

*Bayna al-Islām wa al-Zandaqa*

SHERMAN A. JACKSON

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## FOREWORD

It was some two years ago that the Oxford University Press, Pakistan, took the initiative of arousing my interest in the possibility of launching a series in Islamic philosophy; I seized the opportunity immediately, and the idea was given a formal character soon thereafter. To my delight, three of my respected friends and scholarly colleagues agreed to serve on an Editorial Advisory Board—Professors Michael Cook of Princeton, Everett Rowson of the University of Pennsylvania, and Robert Wisnovsky of Harvard. And so the process began.

The principle governing this series is the availability of reliable studies in that historical phenomenon we call Islamic or Arabic philosophy—the question of the appellation here being more than nominal. These studies are conceived with a general educated audience in view, in addition to but not excluding experts.

So here we have the first volume in the series. I am particularly pleased that it begins with that formidable thinker al-Ghazālī, who was called ‘the most original mind among Arabian philosophers’ by the nineteenth-century European philologist Ernest Renan, and whose influence is so enduring in the Islamic world that, one can legitimately say, much of this world still lives in a Ghazālian twilight. Indeed, classifying al-Ghazālī has always exercised historians—is he at all a philosopher in the Hellenized sense of being a *faylasūf*? Or is he a sufi? Or is he a theologian? Or is he all of this at once, or none of this at all? These questions are complex and do not lend themselves to neat answers. But one thing is clear: al-Ghazālī cannot be excluded from an account of Islamic philosophy proper. Beginning the series with him, then, is in many ways a particularly apt beginning.

This work by Professor Sherman Jackson has Ghazālī's *Fayṣal al-Tafrīqā* at its core—it contains an annotated translation of the text, preceded by an extensive introductory section in which the author reconstructs the historical and theoretical context of the *Fayṣal* and, in a most animated style, discusses its relevance for contemporary religious thought and practice. A large body of primary sources support this endeavour throughout. The reader is likely to note that Professor Jackson's concerns in this work are both scholarly and existential.

It goes without saying that everybody will enthusiastically welcome the availability of a newer and crisper English translation of an important Ghazālīan text, a highly readable translation with very useful annotations. But Professor Jackson's Introduction too is not without great interest: it embodies his powerful thesis that there is no getting away from the contingencies of history; that we all construct our world; that the world is not given to us as such. The implications of this thesis are far-reaching indeed.

Before closing, I must express my grateful thanks to Ameena Saiyid of Oxford University Press, Pakistan, for her kindness and her outstanding vision and leadership. I remain profoundly indebted to my colleagues on the Editorial Advisory Board.

I am exceedingly happy to introduce to the reader this first volume in the *Studies in Islamic Philosophy* series.

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania  
February 2001

S. Nomanul Haq  
University of Pennsylvania



## PREFACE

Many years ago, while still a graduate student at the University of Pennsylvania, I read (when I probably should have been reading assigned materials) a copy of '*Fayṣal al-tafrīqa bayna al-islām wa al-zandaqa*'—*The Decisive Criterion for Distinguishing Islam from Masked Infidelity*—by the renowned jurist, mystic, philosopher, and theologian, Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, arguably the most famous Muslim intellectual in the history of Islam. True to its title, this work set out to provide a legally-sanctioned definition of Unbelief (*kufṛ*) as the basis for a criterion for determining who, as far as theology is concerned, is to be considered a Muslim and who is not. Its brevity notwithstanding, I was immediately struck by the depth and imaginative power of the work, particularly in the context of the perduring conflict between Traditionalism and Rationalism in pre-modern Islam. I could also see, however, its relevance to the contemporary Muslim theological scene, given some of the charges and counter-charges raging between revivalist groups like the rationalist *Aḥbāsh* and the traditionalist *Salafiyya*. This was also a time when Minister Louis Farrakhan was at the height of his activity, a fact that periodically resurrected discussions among African-American Muslims over whether or not he, Elijah Muhammad, and the whole Nation of Islam should be considered Muslims. In fact, even Elijah Muhammad's son and successor, Imām Warith Deen Muhammad, remained under a cloud of suspicion following his courageous redirecting of the NOI, into Sunni Islam. Meanwhile, there were other, less-known figures, like Imām 'Īsā Muḥammad (al-Sayyid 'Īsā al-Hādī al-Mahdī, leader of the Anṣār Allāh Community)<sup>1</sup> whose exotic claims and scriptural interpretations seemed to reflect more conspicuously an ulterior agenda not totally in step with Islam. Yet, depending on who was making the charge, it was not always

clear how his alleged heresy differed from that attributed to Minister Farrakhan or Imām Warith Deen Muhammad or the *Aḥbāsh* or the *Salafiya*. For in many instances, the charges levied against these groups lacked a clear and solid basis, reflected a double standard, or were heavily tied to personalities, weaknesses that were only obscured by the stridency with which the charges themselves were cast. Read against this backdrop, it became clear to me that al-Ghazālī had gone well beyond his immediate context and objectives and produced in *Fayṣal* a classic work of enduring utility and relevance.

Several years later, after obtaining my Ph.D. and entering the classroom, I was invited to team-teach a course at the University of Michigan entitled, 'African-American Religion Between Christianity and Islam,' with my now good friend and visiting Presidential Scholar, Charles H. Long. It was during the course of this endeavor that I encountered Black Theology, a movement among African-American Christians that had mounted a critique of traditional Christian theology, arguing that the latter was neither universally valid nor enabling and that both the questions it asked and the answers it proffered were meaningful to only a limited segment of the Christian community. Moreover, Black Theology argued, in its present state traditional Christian theology perpetuated notions of white superiority and in so doing served as an instrument of black domination. Given the continued rise of Islam in the African-American community, alongside the growing gaps and developing tensions between immigrant and indigenous Muslims, I began to wonder about the inevitability of a 'Muslim Black Theology'—or, to extend the analogy beyond the African-American community, a 'Muslim American Theology,' or a 'Muslim Feminist Theology,' or even a 'Muslim Womanist Theology'—and how these might relate to traditional Islamic theologies from the Muslim world, particularly on the question of Belief versus Unbelief. Once again, al-Ghazālī's *Fayṣal* sprang to mind.

Throughout this period, given what I took to be its obvious importance, I assumed that *Fayṣal* had been the object of numerous scholarly studies and that I would eventually

encounter these as I continued to read in Islamic law and theology. To my surprise, I discovered that, while several scholars had dealt with aspects of *Fayṣal* in the course of treating other authors or issues, there had been no studies devoted specifically to *Fayṣal* itself. Moreover, almost all of those chapters and sections of books and articles that did treat of the work seemed to miss al-Ghazālī's deep ecumenical concerns, which seemed so prominent and obvious to me. In 1980, R.J. McCarthy published a study and translation of al-Ghazālī's 'autobiography,' '*al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl*' (under the title *Freedom and Fulfillment*<sup>2</sup>), to which he attached a quick translation of *Fayṣal*. Father McCarthy's interest appears, however, not to have gone beyond providing his reader with additional insight into the breadth and style of al-Ghazālī's thought. It was not his intention to produce a reliable scholarly translation of *Fayṣal*.

In light of this continued marginality sustained by *Fayṣal*, I decided a few years ago to produce a scholarly translation of the work. As I proceeded in my off hours to reread and translate the text, however, it quickly dawned on me that my understanding of its basic message, along with many of the broader issues it touched upon in the history of Muslim theology, was at variance with much of what had been written by specialists in the field. I decided, thus, to lay out my views on these issues in order to be able to place the work in what I believed to be its proper ideational context. Given, however, the difficulties students and non-specialists routinely encounter with theological works, I wanted to offer a concise, reader-friendly introduction that would highlight al-Ghazālī and *Fayṣal* and provide some insight into the key issues involved in Muslim theological discourse. To this end, I tried to be brief and to go directly to whatever point was under consideration. I tried as well to resist being drawn into broader debates and controversies not directly related to my aim of contextualizing al-Ghazālī and *Fayṣal*. My efforts in this regard appear in Part One of the Introduction. In Part Two of the Introduction, I offer a brief analysis of the contents of *Fayṣal*. Here too, I tried to limit my

comments to what I felt was necessary to a faithful depiction of *Fayṣal* and the explication of its main arguments.

My primary aim in undertaking this project was to produce an accurate translation of *Fayṣal*. At the same time, given the growing interest in Islam on the part of students and scholars outside the fields of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, my broader objective was to make al-Ghazālī's work accessible to a wider audience. To this end, al-Ghazālī's lofty style and the highly technical nature of his subject notwithstanding, I tried to convey the content of *Fayṣal* via the simplest English possible. To make up for inevitable failures in this regard, I added notes to explain difficult points not treated in the Introduction. Other technical aspects of the translation are discussed in Section D of Part Two of the Introduction.

*Fayṣal*, in my view, is one of the most thoughtful and illuminating theological essays in the history of Islam. I am confident that this will quickly impress itself upon the reader, as will *Fayṣal*'s relevance to the present and future of Muslim theological discourse, East and West. Given the expansion of Islam outside its traditional geographical boundaries, the question of the boundaries of Muslim theological tolerance is even more pressing today than it was when al-Ghazālī first penned *Fayṣal* almost a millenium ago. In translating and analysing *Fayṣal*, I can only hope that I have succeeded in conveying something of the courage, humanity, and brilliance that al-Ghazālī demonstrates throughout this work, and that he would recognize his voice, his mind, and his broader concerns and interests in what I have produced in his name.

## NOTES

1. See, A.B. McCloud, *African American Islam* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 61-3. McCloud's work has brief introductions to all the African-American groups cited.
2. (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1980). A new edition of McCarthy's work has been recently issued by Fons Vitae Press under the title, *Al-Ghazālī: Deliverance From Error*.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book has benefited from the kind and judicious remarks and criticisms of several scholars who were selfless enough to read one or another version of the manuscript on its way to final completion. I would like to thank in this regard Mohammad Fadel, Muneer Fareed, Alexander Knysh, Aminah B. McCloud, Ebrahim Moosa, Bernard Weiss, and John L. Esposito. I would also like to thank the students who participated in the American Learning Institute for Muslims (ALIM) programme during the summer of 1999 for their valuable reactions to and comments on an initial draft of the translation. I would like to thank the members of the Editorial Advisory Board of the *Studies in Islamic Philosophy* series of Oxford University Press, Everett Rowsen, Michael Cook, and Robert Wisnovsky. Very special thanks are due to the General Editor of the series, Syed Nomanul Haq, for the keen interest he expressed in my work and for the careful attention he paid to a number of technical requirements involved in its publication. Finally, I would like to express my deepest and most heartfelt appreciation to my family, especially my wife Heather, for their undying love, their constant support and their continued confidence in me, and for simply putting up with me throughout the life of this project.







# Introduction

## Part One





## A. THEOLOGY: BETWEEN TOLERANCE AND EXCLUSIVITY

Theology, literally *logos* (reasoning, discourse) on *theos* (God or divinity), is the activity of reflecting upon or thinking systematically about God, i.e., His nature, His attributes, and His relations with humanity and the universe.<sup>1</sup> In the broadest sense, theology may be considered a branch of philosophy,<sup>2</sup> and in this capacity need not be associated with any religion or revelation. In its more common, restricted sense, however, theology refers to the efforts of the adherents of revealed religion to understand and explicate what scripture says about God and the Unseen. The result of this effort is invariably a set of doctrines or dogmas which, taken together, are also referred to as 'theology' and, in their distilled form, constitute religious creeds, or what Muslims commonly refer to as '*aqīda*.'<sup>3</sup> Typically, one or another creed will succeed in gaining the assent of those who are vested with or assume the right to define theological orthodoxy (from the Greek, *orthos*, straight, correct, and *doxa*, opinion, doctrine). When this occurs, all other theological doctrines are judged as heresy, and those who profess these irregular views are branded heretics.<sup>4</sup> Heresy, however, in the context of classical Islam, was not in every instance synonymous with infidelity or apostasy. Indeed, in its best tradition, Islam, like Roman Catholicism, recognized, *mutatis mutandis*, the distinction between *formal heresy*, i.e., the wilful persistence in error, and *material heresy*, or the holding of heretical doctrines through no fault of one's own.<sup>5</sup> Heresy, in other words, could connote not one but several categories of theological deviance, from outright Unbelief (*kufr*) to unsanctioned (though non-damning) innovation (*bid'a*) to honest

mistakes and misunderstandings. Whether a doctrine would be relegated to one or another of these categories would depend on how broad or narrow the criterion for determining orthodoxy was and how objectively it was applied. A narrower criterion would make it easier to increase the number of doctrines branded as heresy; a broader, more nuanced one would result in both fewer heresies and in fewer of these being placed outside the pale of the Faith. Worst of all would be those politically, ideologically, or personally motivated criteria whose ill-defined and ever-changing boundaries exposed the very concept of orthodoxy to becoming synonymous with terror.<sup>6</sup> For on such criteria, the boundaries of theological tolerance would extend only as far as political, ideological, or personal expediency dictated.

On the other hand, modern liberal sensibilities notwithstanding, theological tolerance, or the ability to accommodate multiple theological interpretations, is neither the main nor the only concern of theology or orthodoxy. Nor are those who succeed in establishing their theology as orthodox alone in passing harsh judgments (or even calling for sanctions) against their co-religionists. Heretics are often just as strident in their judgements, just as swift in calling for sanctions against their adversaries, and even more convinced of the superiority of their own theological views.<sup>7</sup> This endemic tendency toward judgement and reprobation underscores what theologians typically perceive to be one of the most important objectives of theology as a whole, namely, *to protect the Faith* from what are perceived to be dangerous and destructive ideas and interpretations that threaten to distort the true meaning of revelation, undermine its religious efficacy, and destroy its appeal to hearts and minds beyond the existing circle of believers. From this perspective, a major function of theology resides in its use as a category of exclusion, i.e., as a delineator between true and false claimants to the Faith. In this capacity, its impulse is decidedly in the direction of narrower rather than broader criteria for orthodoxy; for the broader the criterion, the more susceptible the community will be to the influences of



those whose true sentiments are out of step with revelation. And, given the choice between affording heretics greater accommodation and protecting the community from the perceived threat of interpretive viruses, theological traditions will naturally incline toward the latter.

The present book is a study and translation of a criterion for determining theological orthodoxy in Islam devised by one of the most celebrated theologians in Muslim history, *Ḥujjat al-Islām* (Proof of Islam) Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111). This work, entitled *Fayṣal al-tafriqa bayna al-islām wa al-zandaqa* (*The Decisive Criterion for Distinguishing Islam from Masked Infidelity*) is perhaps the first and by far the most thoughtful and systematic of its type in the history of Islam. Written during the last five to six years of al-Ghazālī's life, it reflects the concerns and frustrations of a man deeply troubled by the debilitating effects of both theological intolerance and theological *laissez-faire*. While theological intolerance sapped the community's ability to accommodate plausible theological differences, theological *laissez-faire* confused tolerance with indifference and exposed the community to the machinations of those whose conflation of rationalistic deism with Islam only masked their opposition to the religion of Muhammad.<sup>8</sup>

While I have characterized *Fayṣal* as an effort to establish theological orthodoxy, it should be noted that it is decidedly *not* al-Ghazālī's aim to confer this status exclusively upon any particular theology or theological school. Rather, al-Ghazālī's mission is to define the boundaries within which competing theologies can coexist in mutual recognition of each other, i.e., as 'orthodox,' in the sense of passing theological muster. Al-Ghazālī's aim, in other words, is not to establish who among the theological schools is 'right', but rather to demonstrate the folly and unfairness of the practice of condemning a doctrine as heresy simply because it goes against one's own theology. Furthermore, he insists, even where a doctrine can be justifiably deemed 'wrong' or heretical, this does not necessarily constitute Unbelief.

At bottom, al-Ghazālī's argument against the theological extremists—among whom are both Traditionalists and Rationalists—is that they fail (or refuse) to recognize that their doctrines are grounded in interpretive presuppositions that are historically determined. This failure on their part results in an effective obliteration of the distinction between *interpretation* and *revelation*. In effect, theological extremists regard their doctrines as being unmediated through fallible and unavoidably secular processes of human thought. As such, their doctrines are sublated into the transcendental realm of revelation. On this conflation there is virtually no distinction between a primary and a secondary belief. Rather, the theological extremists hold that to go against *any* of their doctrines is to go against revelation itself, whence the ubiquitous charge of Unbelief hurled against their adversaries.

Against this tendency, al-Ghazālī insists that the only theological doctrines whose violation may serve as a basis for charging a person with Unbelief are 1) fundamentals (*uṣūl*), i.e., belief in God, the prophethood of Muhammad, and the Hereafter; and 2) secondary doctrines that are backed by unanimous consensus (*ijmā'*) or handed down on the authority of the Prophet via diffuse congruence (*tawātur*<sup>9</sup>). At bottom, these were doctrines that could be said in effect to be 'transcendent,' inasmuch as they enjoyed either universal recognition or impeccable transmission, from which it could be inferred that they were impervious to the historical specificities of any group or individual. Even regarding these doctrines, however, al-Ghazālī would insist that the charge of Unbelief could be sustained only against those who deemed the Prophet to have perpetrated lies in teaching such beliefs. This stipulation, given the extremists' conflation of interpretation with revelation and their consequent insistence that anyone who opposes their doctrines effectively charges the Prophet with lying, would form the focal point of *Fayṣal* and occupy the bulk of the work, as al-Ghazālī attempts to demonstrate that both literalness and figurativeness are different but equally valid levels of truth attributable to (Prophetic) statements and that different historical

endowments yield different interpretive presuppositions, which in turn determine the degree of literal or figurative truth attributed to a statement. In the end, al-Ghazālī's point is that, depending on one's interpretive presuppositions, both literal *and* non-literal interpretations may be justified. As such, neither the proponents of literal nor of non-literal interpretations should be automatically accused of charging the Prophet with delivering lies.

As for those whom al-Ghazālī charges with theological *laissez-faire* (to whom I refer hereafter as the Crypto-infidels), these were the Neoplatonic 'Muslim' philosophers (*al-falāsifa*), who are actually the lesser of al-Ghazālī's concerns and are used primarily to demonstrate the limits of theological tolerance in Islam. While al-Ghazālī is disappointingly brief in his treatment of the actual doctrines of the Crypto-infidels, his adjudging them Unbelievers, despite his admission that some of them believe in God, is exceedingly important for what it reveals about the restrictive manner in which he defines *kufṛ* and its use as a category of exclusion. *Kufṛ*, according to al-Ghazālī, is purely a matter of rejecting the truthfulness of the Prophet Muhammad. Beyond this, it reveals, *in and of itself*, virtually nothing about a person's moral or religious constitution.<sup>10</sup> On this understanding, the modern Muslim tendency to employ 'kāfir (Unbeliever)' as a moral, ethnic, cultural, or even civilizational delineator shows itself to be a patent misuse of the category. At the same time, and precisely for this reason, the counter-effort to effectively banish the term 'kāfir' from the Muslim lexicon can be seen to be a superfluous distortion. For on al-Ghazālī's definition, a *kāfir* (*qua kāfir*) is neither immoral, irreligious, nor exempt from receiving recognition—in this world—for the good he or she commits. As such, it is wholly unnecessary to deny that a person is a *kāfir* simply in order to be able to preserve his or her status as a human being possessed of religion or other laudable qualities.<sup>11</sup>

I shall discuss in greater detail both al-Ghazālī and *Fayṣal* in the more immediate contexts of 5th/11th-century Baghdad and Nishapur in Part Two of this introduction. As a preliminary to

that discussion, I should first like to set up the broader conceptual framework within which al-Ghazālī's perception and manner of proceeding are to be understood. The main contours of this framework evolve out of a closer examination of the relationship between theology and history in Islam. This will entail a closer look at the meaning and application of such key constructs as theology, religion, rationalism, traditionalism, orthodoxy, and heresy. This will aid us in following al-Ghazālī's arguments and in measuring more fully the illocutionary force behind his words. It will also alert the reader to the assumptions and presuppositions that underlie my understanding of *Fayṣal* and inform my translation of the text.

## B. THEOLOGY BETWEEN RELIGION AND HISTORY

The celebrated Orientalist Ignaz Goldziher once observed, 'Prophets are not theologians.'<sup>12</sup> This statement rings especially true in the context of Islam for, on the Qur'ānic depiction, the very claim to prophethood is inextricably bound to the assertion that the claimant's pronouncements are emphatically *not* the result of any 'thinking' or 'reflection' on his part.<sup>13</sup> This alone might be enough to convince some that theology *per se* is an alien enterprise grafted, in bad faith, onto the face of Islam. But the matter is not so simple. For while the Prophet may not have been a theologian, he was also not a jurist<sup>14</sup> or a grammarian. Yet law (*fiqh*), jurisprudence (*uṣūl al-fiqh*), and Arabic grammar are all universally recognized as legitimate (even essential) Islamic pursuits. What Goldziher's observation does suggest, however, is that, unlike the data and instruction revealed to the Prophet from beyond history, theology develops *within* the context of human history, and largely for historical rather than purely religious reasons. Indeed, in and of itself, religion both can be and often is atheological or even anti-theological.<sup>15</sup> For, properly speaking, religion (i.e., in its original sense<sup>16</sup>) is purely a matter of sustaining a conscientious commitment to a set of rituals and obligations based on the recognition that one

is bound or indebted to a divine or supernatural power (or powers) outside oneself.<sup>17</sup> Thus, the pre-Islamic Arabians (and, some would argue, the first generations of Muslims) could have religion with no corresponding theology. Similarly, according to Joseph R. Washington, Jr., Black or African-American religion in the US, what he terms 'The Fifth Religion',<sup>18</sup> was a religion that failed to develop a theology.<sup>19</sup>

By definition, religion cannot dispense with the idea of God (or at least some 'divine or supernatural power (or powers) outside oneself'). As such, to have religion is to have belief in and hence belief about God. But this is not the same as engaging in theology. For theology entails a commitment to a particular *process* via which beliefs about God are arrived at and sustained. It is perfectly possible, on the other hand, to arrive at and sustain beliefs about God independent of this process. This raises an important point about the aforementioned term, '*aqīda*'.<sup>20</sup> For '*aqīda*' (from the Arabic verb '*a-qa-da*, to bind, to hold), denotes only what one holds to be true, not the process via which one arrives at or sustains that belief. The fact that one has an '*aqīda*', in other words, does not at all imply that one has engaged in the activity of theology. One simply does not have to have theology in order to have an '*aqīda*'. Moreover, to the extent that one accepts the proposition that revelation comes from beyond history, one must also accept the possibility that '*aqīda*' can be transcendent. (Indeed, a Muslim would insist that the '*aqīda*' of the Prophet was transcendent.) Theology, on the other hand, being grounded in human thought, can never be transcendent.

To say, however, that theology can never be transcendent is not at all to say that it can never be right or that it can never apprehend the truth. After all, one can arrive at the same conclusions with theology as one arrives at without it. But beyond the simple aim of arriving at the truth, part of the whole point of theology is to be able to know and validate the fact that one has arrived at the truth, which is why so many Muslim theologians were traditionally hostile towards the practice of theological *taqlīd*, i.e., acceptance on faith. At bottom, however, theology can only achieve this goal of knowing and validating



its arrival at truth through a continuous process of verification. That is to say, the theologian achieves certainty only through the experience of verifying his and his predecessor's theological conclusions. Yet the theologian is limited in this regard by the fact that his experience, as a finite being, is itself limited. Indeed, one can only imagine how significantly his verifications might be enhanced by an additional hundred years of life. God, on the other hand, as the Infinite (*al-Awwal*, *al-Ākhir*), speaks from the perspective of infinite 'experience' (perhaps the real significance behind His attribute, *al-Khabīr*). Thus, in contradistinction to the informed speculations of the theologian, God's statements are effectively verified through an infinity of experience, beyond which any additional verification becomes superfluous. As we shall see, this distinction between theology and non-theological apprehension of truth is basic to al-Ghazālī's outlook and is expressed in a variety of ways and on a number of levels. In fact, in his view, part of the whole problem of theological intolerance begins with the theologians' unwillingness (or inability) to acknowledge the limits of their enterprise, as a result of which they seek to impose through abstract formal reasoning what can only be established through cumulative verification, for which their approach is a poor and inadequate substitute.<sup>21</sup>

Returning to our original point, there is no essential or even necessary relationship between theology and religion. The real impetus behind theology emerges out of the concrete historical experience of a community. In the case of Islam, history informed the development of theology in at least three ways: 1) it provided the initial impetus; 2) it defined the issues; and 3) it bequeathed the method.<sup>22</sup> These factors, to borrow the expression of the late Fazlur Rahman, were both coeval and consubstantial. The method used could not be separated from the impetus that brought theological discourse into being, which in turn could not be separated from the issues that defined that discourse. In the present context, however, methodology emerges as the primary concern, because even where competing parties agreed on specific issues (e.g., beatific vision or the

createdness of the Qur'ān) they remained divided and destined to conflict on methodological grounds. Thus, questions of theological tolerance inevitably came down to the possibility of mutual recognition among competing methodologies. Such recognition would remain long in the coming, however, as long as the provenance of these competing methods remained shrouded in a rhetoric of transcendence and theology was presented as either an extension of revelation or a simple form of scriptural exegesis (*tafsīr*).<sup>23</sup>

Two facts, however, both of which al-Ghazālī recognizes, suggest a way out of this conundrum. The first of these is that theology and exegesis are two distinct enterprises. The essential function of exegesis (from the Greek, 'to bring out'<sup>24</sup>) is to explain the meaning of a text, much like a dictionary does in the case of individual words. Theology, on the other hand, seeks to justify or reconcile meaning on the basis of some pre-existing or external criterion, in the process of which it is subject to falling into *eisegesis*, i.e., reading meaning into a text. An example of this distinction between theology and exegesis is reflected in the early *tafsīr* work by Muḥammad Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/922). There, in treating Qur'ān 89:22, '*wa jā'a rabbuka wa al-malaku ṣaffan ṣaffan...*(and your Lord and the angels come, line after line),' al-Ṭabarī explains the meaning of this verse in simple dictionary fashion, limiting his additions to a few details surrounding the occasion of God's coming. He makes no attempt to reconcile this with any preconceived criteria, such as the avoidance of anthropomorphism or the duty to pass on problematic verses without attempting to attribute any concrete meaning to them (*imrāruhā kamā jā'at*).<sup>25</sup> The same basic approach is repeated in the case of the verb *istawā*, which was at the centre of the controversy over God's mounting the Throne (*istawā 'alā al-'arsh*). Here, however, al-Ṭabarī notes that there was controversy, and after a brief digression aimed at establishing the propriety of his simple explication, he stops and says: 'Were it not for my disdain for dragging this book out to great lengths by filling it with matters *that do not belong to this genre*, I would point out the falsity of every statement that



contradicts the view of the People of Truth.<sup>26</sup> In other words, according to al-Ṭabarī, exegesis, or *tafsīr*, is, strictly speaking, a genre for *explaining* scripture, not for justifying or reconciling it with any broader criteria.

On the other hand, anyone familiar with the theological writings of contemporaries and near contemporaries of al-Ṭabarī, from Rationalists like al-Ash‘arī (d. 325/936)<sup>27</sup> and al-Māturidī (d. 333/944)<sup>28</sup> to Traditionalists like Ibn Ḥanbal (d. 241/855)<sup>29</sup> and al-Dārimī (d. 280/893),<sup>30</sup> knows that these works typically treated verses like these in ways that reconciled them with some master theological principle. To take just one example, in his ‘*al-Radd ‘alā al-zanādiqa wa al-jahmiya*,’ Imām Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal’s treatment of the verses on God’s mounting the Throne, e.g., ‘*al-rahmān ‘alā al-‘arsh istawā*,’ is grounded in his opposition to the Jahmite position to the effect that God is in all places and not limited to any particular station on or above the Throne. His ‘explanation’ includes several proofs and analogies via which he argues that God is not everywhere and that God’s knowledge of all things does not necessitate His existing in all places. Typical of his manner of proceeding is the following:

If you want to know that the Jahmite invents lies against God when he claims that God is everywhere and that He is not in one place to the exclusion of others, ask him the following: ‘Did not God exist when there was nothing else?’ He will say, ‘Yes.’ Then say to him: ‘When He created things, did He create them in Himself or outside Himself?’ Here he will have to choose one of three responses. If he claims that God created things inside His self, this is Unbelief (*kufṛ*), since it implies that jinn and humans and devils (*shayāṭīn*) are in God’s self. If he says, He created them outside Himself and then entered into them, this too is Unbelief, since it implies that (among those places) He entered into (were) deserted, dirty, and despicable places. If he says that He created them outside Himself and did not enter into them, this amounts to a total retraction of his position. And this is the position of the People of Sunna.<sup>31</sup>

Over the course of his argument, Imām Aḥmad adduces no less than twenty-two verses from the Qur’ān, the cumulative

effect of which is to give the impression that he is engaging in nothing more than *tafsīr*. It becomes clear, however, to anyone who follows his discussion from beginning to end, that these verses are being 'explained' in light of a master principle to the effect that God is not everywhere and no matter what the linguistic possibilities of these verses might be they can never be left to imply that He is.<sup>32</sup> Of course, like every theologian, Imām Aḥmad would insist that this 'master principle' was itself derived from revelation. But in the absence of a unanimous consensus (*ijmā'*) to back this derivation, its authority could only stand on the claim (implied or explicit) that it was the direct and inevitable result of a method that was itself prescribed by revelation. This, however, raises its own set of difficulties and takes us to the second of the two facts alluded to above.

While scripture may be the object of the theologian's thinking, scripture does not prescribe any particular method or modality for that thinking. The Qur'ān is not a book of logic, nor a manual on formal reasoning or systematic thinking. To be sure, the Qur'ān points to several prerequisites for receiving and benefiting from its guidance, e.g., humility, God-consciousness, and a willingness to use one's mind. In several places it even models rational arguments against the rejecters of truth. But while the Qur'ān urges its audience to 'think' (*tafakkur*), 'ponder' (*tadabbur*), and 'reason' (*'aql*), it never tells them *how* to do any of this.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, despite its positive valuation of reason and its frequent and forceful injunctions to utilize one's faculties, the Qur'ān does not present itself as a handbook on formal reasoning. The same is true of the Sunna. Now, the natural inference to be drawn from this is that God does not tell us how to think for the same reason that He does not tell us how to breathe or sleep: we already know how to think; for thinking is as innate to human nature as is breathing or sleeping. On this understanding, the early Muslims would naturally apply to the Qur'ān the same method and standard of thinking that they used for any other serious endeavour. They would think on the Qur'ān the same way they thought seriously about anything else. And this they would do, inevitable

exceptions notwithstanding, with the zeal and earnestness of any new converts to a new faith. Initially, this would lead to little more than normal and manageable levels of discord. Real problems would arise, however, as Islam moved out of its isolation in Arabia to settle among the inhabitants of the world of Late Antiquity, where geography, history, and tradition had endowed different individuals and communities with more fundamentally different ways and approaches to thinking. These different endowments would lead in turn to different attitudes towards and approaches to theology. This was the beginning and most important source of theological discord in Islam, a full appreciation of which has only been obscured by the Muslim theologians' rhetoric of transcendence.

Yet, the typical Western approach, which prides itself on its ability to see through the claims and attributions of the Muslim theologians, has not fared much better. Rather, it too has tended to impede rather than promote a proper understanding of the impact of these differential historical endowments.

It is common knowledge that the influence of Christian theology, the Persian Zoroastrian and Manichaean traditions, and Indian and especially Greek philosophy on Muslim theological discourse was both fundamental and enduring.<sup>34</sup> Traditionally, however, Western scholars have portrayed this influence as an instance of cross-civilizational borrowing. At the same time, Muslims are said to have denied or played down this influence, based on their ideological commitment to the premise that 'Islam is self-sufficient and that in Qur'ān and Hadith it contains in essentials all the religious and moral truth required by all humanity to the end of time.'<sup>35</sup> Under ordinary circumstances, fear of self-incrimination might pre-empt any reaction to such a view. But such depictions mask an important point that bears directly on our understanding of the nature and causes of theological discord—and thus the requirements and possibilities of theological tolerance—in Islam. Simply stated, the notion of Muslim 'borrowing' is based on an artificial bifurcation of the world of Late Antiquity and early Islam into Greek and Persian (alien), on the one hand, and Arab-Muslim

(native), on the other, followed by the assumption that any elements of the former found among the latter must be the result of cross-civilizational borrowing. This picture becomes a bit more complicated, however, when we consider that the overwhelming majority of the early Muslims—as well as those who would become Arabs—had theretofore been ‘Greeks,’ Mazdakites, Manichaeans, Christians, and Zoroastrians. R. Bulliet goes a long way in confirming this in his book *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period*,<sup>36</sup> and it is being pointed out with increasing frequency and clarity by historians of Late Antiquity, e.g., P. Brown, G.W. Bowersock, and O. Grabar in their recent edited volume, *Late Antiquity*.<sup>37</sup> In fact, in that same volume, the Islamic historian Hugh Kennedy writes:

Of all the dividing lines set up between academic disciplines in the western intellectual tradition, the frontier between classical and Islamic studies has proved among the most durable and impenetrable...[W]hereas late antiquity can be seen as part of the broader history of western civilization, the history of the Islamic world cannot. Yet reflection will soon suggest that the changes cannot have been so sudden and dramatic, especially at the level of the structures of everyday life, and that *the Islamic was as much, and as little, a continuation of late antiquity as was western Christendom*.<sup>38</sup>

On this understanding, the notion of the early Muslims ‘borrowing’ from Hellenism (and the other traditions) would be something akin to the notion of American Muslims ‘borrowing’ from the traditions of capitalism, democracy, or Black Religion. Rather than a conscious borrowing, this influence would be more aptly viewed as an unconscious (or in some instances, conscious) retention of ideas and concepts that were assumed to be just as valid under Islam as they were under the old order. My point here is not to deny or play down the existence of Greek and other elements in Muslim theological discourse, or even that (later) Muslims may have disliked admitting this. My point is, rather, to challenge the notion that this ‘borrowing’ was the result of a conscious choice in the face of other known,

and presumably Islamic, alternatives, that under 'the attraction of Greek thought,'<sup>39</sup> Muslims went so far as to import ideas and concepts from the Aegean Sea. If the Muslim theologians' rhetoric of transcendence has served to obscure the role of the various endowments brought by the early converts, the Western tendency to racialize (*en route* to appropriating) the Greeks (while downplaying the impact of the other traditions) has been no less misleading.

The spread of Islam outside the Arabian Peninsula brought into the fold of the Muslim empire a range of peoples, cultures, intellectual and religious traditions. In the early period, there was no such thing as 'Islamic thought,' like the *uṣūl al-fiqh*, *kalām*, and *uṣūl al-dīn* that would later be so designated. As such, conversion to Islam did not oblige individuals to convert to any particular tradition of thinking. Rather, converts would come to Islam with the intention of 'thinking' on the data of revelation in the best way they knew how, be that way grounded in a Greek, Manichaean, or Arab nativist tradition. Over the course of the formative period, some of these traditions would be able to sustain themselves as legitimate while others would be rejected as alien or even antithetical to Islam. In the final analysis, however, all of them would share a common trait: they were all historically determined, ultimately external to revelation.<sup>40</sup> Recognizing this fact would appear to be the *sine qua non* for the success of any religion with universalist claims. It is interesting, however, to see so many who champion the universalist claims of Islam unable or unwilling to recognize this fact. For his part, not only would al-Ghazālī embrace this reality, his *Fayṣal* would constitute an attempt to construct a criterion for orthodoxy based directly on it.<sup>41</sup>

### C. THEOLOGY BETWEEN TRADITIONALISM AND RATIONALISM

Directly related to the relationship between theology and history is the relationship between what Islamicists have termed



Traditionalism and Rationalism, the two main approaches to theology in Islam. To date, modern scholarship has been unanimous in its depiction of the basic distinction between these two approaches as residing in their differential relationship to reason. My contention, however, is that it is primarily history that divides these two approaches and that Traditionalism is no more devoid of the use of reason than Rationalism is of a reliance on tradition. As such, these two approaches are better understood as different *traditions of reason*. This view of things has direct and obvious implications for our understanding of the nature and meaning of theological discord in Islam. Moreover, in addition to enabling us to cut through some of the fictions and rhetoric generated by both theological approaches, this insight is critical to a full appreciation of al-Ghazālī's manner of proceeding in *Fayṣal*.

A representative example of the standard view of the relationship between Traditionalism and Rationalism appears in a recent work by Binyamin Abrahamov, *Islamic Theology: Traditionalism and Rationalism*. Abrahamov begins by noting that reason and tradition typically oppose each other,

mainly because tradition causes continuity, and hence stability, while reason causes change, and hence instability. Tradition is usually traced back to a great authority such as the teachings of great ancestors, while reason is based on personal efforts and does not submit to external authority. In the domain of religion, the debate between tradition and reason is sharper than in other domains, for tradition has the authority of divine revelation.<sup>42</sup>

Abrahamov goes on to define Traditionalism and Rationalism, beginning with the concept of tradition.

The word 'tradition' means literally handing over, but it also includes the object of handing over, which, in our case, is practices and beliefs. The words or deeds of Muhammad and his followers, the Companions (*al-ṣaḥāba*) and their Followers (*tābi'ūn*), were handed down to posterity in a kind of communication called *ḥadīth* (a tradition, literally a tale or a report).<sup>43</sup>



Traditionalists are thus

those who have regarded religious knowledge as deriving from the Revelation (the Qur'ān), the Tradition (the Sunna) and the Consensus (*ijmā'*) and preferred these sources to reason in treating religious matters. The Traditionalists are mostly named *ahl al-sunna wa'l-jamā'a*.<sup>44</sup>

As for Rationalism, Professor Abrahamov defines it as

the tendency to consider reason the principal device or one of the principal devices to reach the truth in religion, and the preference of reason to revelation and tradition in dealing with some theological matters, mainly when a conflict arose between them.<sup>45</sup>

Abrahamov notes that the Rationalists of whom he speaks were not those who held reason to be the sole authority in attaining the truth, for such persons were generally regarded as Unbelievers and excluded from the pale of the Faith. By Rationalists he means, rather, 'those who attacked the Traditionalists and their doctrines on the basis of reason, claiming that much, but not all, of religious knowledge can be known through reason.'<sup>46</sup> In Muslim parlance, the Rationalists to whom he refers were known as the '*ahl al-kalām*,' or '*mutakallimūn*,' and their theological science was known as '*ilm al-kalām*' or simply '*kalām*.' Finally, in order to avoid the mistake of overgeneralization, Abrahamov notes that a Traditionalist 'may be rational in dealing with a theological issue...but he may not ascribe to reason any advantage over the Qur'ān or the Sunna.'<sup>47</sup> Similarly,

there is no pure rationalism, in the sense that all religious issues derive from reason. There are different degrees of rationalism; the most rationalist group is the Mu'tazila who used reason as a source of knowledge in many theological issues, whereas the Ash'arites are less rationalist than the Mu'tazilites. But there is pure traditionalism. Traditionalists who have not used reason in deriving the principles of religion can be called pure traditionalists.<sup>48</sup>

The remainder of the book is an impressive array of material from various Rationalist and Traditionalist theologians, Abrahamov's analysis of which aims at demonstrating the validity, scope, and interconnectedness of the definitions and categories outlined above.<sup>49</sup> The latter are in turn repeated in the book's concluding Summary.

To go directly to my point, Professor Abrahamov's treatment reflects the common tendency to embrace the fictions and ideological positions put forth by both Traditionalism and Rationalism and then to proceed to explain the history of Muslim theology through this cross-eyed vision. On this approach, however, Traditionalism and Rationalism can only be seen either through their own eyes or through the eyes of their adversaries, which means that, at any point in the analysis, our understanding will be informed by only one of their constructions of reason or tradition. This, however, inevitably leads away from rather than toward the real issue, namely, the attempt on the part of both camps to reify its definitions of reason and tradition such that anyone who claims to rely on either must pay homage to their views. The inadequacy of this approach is manifested in the recurrent phenomenon of scholars starting out with thick and ostensibly unbreachable boundaries between reason and tradition (or revelation), only to collapse the one into the other as they move into the actual doctrines and justifications of Rationalists or Traditionalists. This, again, is the result of a failure to apprehend the real source of contention, namely that both Traditionalism and Rationalism are human constructs that purport to represent transcendent or ahistorical approaches to revelation (including Qur'ān, Sunna, and hadith<sup>50</sup>). At the same time, both sides' resistance to the other's pretensions prevents them from agreeing on the terms of reference, even as they both continue to rely upon reason and tradition.

To be more specific, Rationalism is really an attempt to conflate and identify Aristotelian logic, along with certain Neoplatonic metaphysical assumptions and principles (in their Arabic form), with 'human reason,' i.e., *'aql* or *naẓar*.<sup>51</sup> Traditionalism, on the other hand, is the attempt to conflate and

identify a particular construction of the past with 'the way things have always been'. Rationalists often invoke tradition (including hadith and tracing the provenance of their tradition back to the Pious Ancestors or *salaf*<sup>52</sup>) but they are hostile toward the authority claimed by Traditionalists for the latter's construction of that tradition. Meanwhile, Rationalist writings reflect a clear and sustained recognition of the authority of the Aristotelian-Neoplatonic tradition, including the propriety of following it by way of *taqlid*.<sup>53</sup> Traditionalists, on the other hand, use *reason*—even aspects of Aristotelian reason—but they do not recognize the tradition of Aristotelian reason as an ultimate authority. Moreover, they are appalled by the Rationalists' selective acceptance and rejection of what they (Traditionalists) identify as 'Islamic' tradition.<sup>54</sup> Yet, compared with the entire record of everything handed down from the past, the Traditionalists' normative 'tradition' shows itself to be a synthetic rather than a 'natural' product, bearing clear signs of selective endorsement. At bottom, both of these approaches appeal to the notion that their way of understanding is not only 'Islamic' but 'natural' or 'God-given,' as opposed to 'artificial,' 'contrived,' 'alien,' or even 'man-made'.<sup>55</sup> This underlies the basic argument that each seeks to sustain against the other. And virtually all of their rhetoric is directed toward this end.

Let me try to clarify this point in more concrete terms, beginning with Rationalism.

Professor Abrahamov defined the Rationalists as 'those who attacked the traditionalists and their doctrines on the basis of reason'.<sup>56</sup> In point of fact, however, this statement reflects an acceptance of the Rationalists' conflation of reason with the Aristotelian-Neoplatonic tradition. This becomes clear when we consider that, while the fundamental criticism levied by Rationalists against Traditionalist doctrine was that it was anthropomorphic (and anthropomorphism, particularly *tashbih* and *tajsīm*, as opposed to outright infidelity, idolatry, or associationism, was *the* critical issue separating the two camps<sup>57</sup>) this 'anthropomorphism' was not at all grounded in plain 'reason' but in a particular reading of the Aristotelian-

Neoplatonic tradition. Otherwise, it would have been perfectly possible to reconcile any number of ostensibly anthropomorphic Traditionalist doctrines with the dictates of 'plain' or even formal reasoning. It was only Rationalist rhetoric, particularly their conflation of reason, i.e., *'aql* and *nazar*, with a particular construction of the Aristotelian-Neoplatonic tradition, that concealed this fact. Meanwhile, modern scholarship's identification with this rhetoric—and this Aristotelian-Neoplatonic tradition—has helped to preserve the power and functionality of this conflation and to keep it from becoming unmasked.

Perhaps the simplest way to demonstrate this point would be through an insight gleaned from the writings of the philosopher-theologian Charles Hartshorne. Hartshorne was one of the leaders of a movement among modern Christian thinkers commonly known as Process Theology (or Process Theism). Recognizing the relationship between Christian theology and Aristotle, Process Theology began with a critique of the Aristotelian obsession with 'being' or 'existence' as the ultimate concern of philosophy and theology.<sup>58</sup> This critique is directly relevant to Muslim theology. For, as the Japanese Islamicist T. Izutsu put it, 'from the earliest phase of the development of Islamic philosophy, the concept of "existence" (*wujūd*), as a heritage from Greek philosophy, was the greatest metaphysical problem the Muslim thinkers had to face.'<sup>59</sup> In place of being, Hartshorne (following Alfred North Whitehead and others) wanted to substitute 'becoming' or 'process' as a more realistic representation of reality, whence the name 'Process Theology'. This brought him to a re-reading of Aristotle, the most important by-product of which would be (for our present purposes) a whole range of alternative possibilities in the relationship between reason and ostensibly anthropomorphic ideas, possibilities that have been effectively suppressed by the rhetoric of the Muslim Rationalists.

Beginning with the Aristotelian categories 'necessary,' 'contingent,' and 'impossible,' (i.e., *wājib*, *mumkin*, *muḥāl*) with which students of Muslim theology are all too familiar,

Hartshorne points out that, in reality, 'necessary' is indistinguishable from 'always' and that it is only due to the fact that B *always* follows A or that B *never* follows A that we can speak of the causal relationship between them as being 'necessary' or 'impossible'. Time, in other words, not space (or 'being,' as some sort of third dimension), is the template that provides these statements with meaning. On such an understanding, a 'necessary' event or being whose existence—as a *necessary event or being*—cannot be established at the moment (since the 'always' needed to do this can only be established after the passing of an infinity of time) must be in a state of becoming, since its necessariness pre-empts the possibility of its non-existence. Similarly, for a thing to be eternal is for it to be necessary in the sense of its always existing. But this too demands a constant state of becoming, since it can never not be. On this view, it is 'becoming,' according to Hartshorne, as opposed to 'being' that is the true and constant template of these logical categories and the reality to which they refer.<sup>60</sup> But, if 'becoming'—which in the context of Muslim theology is universally held to be an accident (*'araḍ*)—is admitted as the basis of the 'necessary,' then the meaning of 'anthropomorphism' would have to be radically altered, if indeed it retained any meaning at all. For in the context of Muslim theological discourse, anthropomorphism was precisely the attribution of *accidents* (including change or becoming) to God, not the simple attribution of human qualities to God.<sup>61</sup>

Hartshorne also notes that Aristotle had learned from Plato that the eternal-necessary was superior to the contingent-possible and that the temporal and changing was inherently inferior. Hartshorne insists that this is a fallacy that can be easily detected once the following is taken into account. There are two kinds of necessary-eternal being: 1) one that is necessary-eternal not only in its existence but in all its nature, what he calls the 'necessary simpliciter'; and 2) one that is necessary-eternal in its existence and essential nature but not in all its reality, which may include inessential or changing qualities and states (e.g., the heavens according to Aristotle, which were eternal-necessary but moved



in ■ circular locomotion). Now, Aristotle had held the first kind of eternal-necessary to be superior to the second, presumably on the view that actuality is superior to potentiality. Hartshorne points out, however, that it is only the actuality of a *given* potential that is superior to *that* potential unrealized, and that even this notion approaches the point of diminishing returns when the total absence of all unrealized potential comes to be thought of as the best of all possibilities. In other words, there is something counter-intuitive in the notion that the *inability* to improve is somehow superior to the *ability* to do so. Similarly, while the second type of eternal-necessary may lack duration and security in some of its aspects, the necessary simpliciter, although it enjoys duration and security in all its aspects, may lack concreteness, richness, and definite content. For, again, the actualization of all potential could only obtain, if at all, in the abstract. And on this understanding, it may be better to have absolute security *and* concreteness (including change) than it is to have absolute security *without* concreteness.<sup>62</sup> Such an understanding has obvious implications for such constructs as perfection (*kamāl*) and imperfection (*naqṣ*), which informed so many of the debates between Traditionalists and Rationalists, e.g., the debate over whether God could have affective traits such as happiness or anger, as indicated in a number of hadith.<sup>63</sup> These possibilities, however, are, again, obscured by Rationalist rhetoric.

To be sure, there are many aspects of Hartshorne's philosophy to which one might take exception. Indeed, Process Theology includes a number of tenets (explicit and implied) that any Muslim—Traditionalist or Rationalist—would definitely reject.<sup>64</sup> But whatever charges one may make against Hartshorne, one cannot accuse him of flouting reason. His views are rational, sophisticated, and just as grounded in formal reasoning as the Aristotelian concepts he rejects. More importantly, Hartshorne's philosophy exposes the Rationalist ruse represented in the conflation of 'reason' with the Aristotelian-Neoplatonic tradition by showing that there is no necessary contradiction between 'reason' and the ostensibly

anthropomorphic doctrines of the Traditionalists. The only contradiction that exists is between these doctrines and the Rationalists' construction of the Aristotelian-Neoplatonic tradition. Otherwise, on Hartshorne's reasoning, it might be no more unreasonable to affirm God's mounting the Throne, or His descending to the lower heavens in the last third of the night or His laughing at His penitent servant, than it would be to negate these doctrines or explain them away.

In sum, Muslim Rationalism was both a human construct and the heir to a concrete and very specific tradition of formal reasoning. To those who inherited or later subscribed to this tradition, its method of proceeding may have come so naturally, and the results of its application may have appeared so incontrovertible, that non-reason or irrationality appeared to be the only imaginable alternative. This, at least, would be the ideological position maintained by the Muslim Rationalists. And it was ultimately this ideological position that sustained the stigma and stereotype of fideism and opposition to reason being the hallmark of Traditionalism.

Turning to Traditionalism, before attempting to demonstrate that it too is a human construct that tries to pass itself off as a transcendent order, I should first like to clarify what I mean by this charge. My argument is not that what Traditionalists claim to be tradition is invented or concocted or a misrepresentation of or about the past. My point is rather that the past—as a simple matter of history—does not pass unprocessed and unmediated into the present. Instead, someone has to make decisions about which aspects of the past are non-essential and thus allowed to drop out, and which elements of the present are consistent with the past and thus eligible for admission into the sanctum of tradition. Traditionalists, also referred to as *Ḥanbalites*,<sup>65</sup> are those who both defend the process via which these decisions have been made by a particular party in the past—namely those who rejected the Aristotelian-Neoplatonic tradition—and see themselves as heirs to that party, on the basis of which they claim the right to oversee this process in the present. At bottom, what separates the Traditionalists from the



Rationalists is not so much that each assigns different levels of importance or authority to tradition *per se*, but rather the different grounds that each recognizes as the basis upon which this process of selective endorsement can and should be carried out.

Perhaps the simplest way of demonstrating this point would be through an insight gleaned from the work of the Ghanaian scholar Kwame Gyekye. In his book, *Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience*,<sup>66</sup> Gyekye grapples with the problem of how to reconcile the concept of modernity with the concept of tradition such that the assumed incompatibility between the two might be reduced and traditional African societies might be able, in good conscience, to adopt certain aspects of modernity. To this end, in a chapter entitled 'Tradition and Modernity,' Gyekye sets out to expose the degree to which the polarity between tradition and modernity has been exaggerated by a fundamental misunderstanding of tradition. It is this discussion that provides the relevant insight into the issue at hand.

Beginning with several scholarly definitions of tradition (from the Latin *traditum*, to hand down from the past), Gyekye notes that all of them centre around the concept of transmission or simple handing down—H.B. Acton: 'a belief or practice transmitted from one generation to another and accepted as authoritative or deferred to, without argument'; E. Shils: 'anything which is transmitted or handed down from the past to the present'; S. Fleischacker: 'a set of customs passed down over the generations, and a set of beliefs and values endorsing those customs'.<sup>67</sup> Gyekye points out, however, that these definitions are all problematic inasmuch as they fail to recognize the fundamental difference between transmitting beliefs and practices to future generations and merely placing these at a present generation's disposal. This is critical inasmuch as, as far as establishing tradition is concerned, the operative element is not the handing down but the *preservation* of beliefs and practices. For it is only if what is handed down is actually preserved (and according to Gyekye, for several generations<sup>68</sup>) that a tradition is formed. This preservation, however, can be

carried out not by the transmitting generation, but only by the receiving one, which for any number of reasons may choose to abandon or modify what it receives. This process of maintaining, abandoning, or modifying entails in turn an act of evaluation, which, Gyekye reiterates, would be irrelevant were tradition merely what is handed down from the past.<sup>69</sup> On this understanding, he redefines tradition as:

any cultural product that was created or pursued by past generations and that, having been accepted and preserved, in whole or in part, by successive generations, has been maintained to the present.<sup>70</sup>

In sum, tradition is *not* the result of the simple *act* of transmission or handing down, but rather of a *process* of evaluation, amplification, suppression, refinement, and assessing the polarity between would-be tradition and indigenous innovations and/or non-indigenous ideas and practices. Equally if not more important, as long as no essential elements are deemed to have been sacrificed in this process of 'reception', the result will be a tradition that, while only a simulacrum of the original, is vested with all the authority of having resulted from a direct act of handing down. In other words, as long as a set of ideas or practices, regardless of their actual origin, receive endorsement from the custodial generation, they will enjoy the full status and authority of authentic tradition, despite their inclusion of elements unknown to the ancestors or founding generation.

Gyekye's notion of critical evaluation and selective endorsement is not without application to the history of Islam. Indeed, for this not to be the case would mean that, following the death of the Prophet all the way up to the time of the Traditionalist movement, Muslims continued to eat exactly what the Prophet and his Companions ate, to wear exactly what they wore, to talk exactly like they talked, and to admit nothing from the repertoire of indigenous innovations or non-indigenous ideas and practices. This may be the ideological position asserted by

some (perhaps Professor Abrahamov's 'pure traditionalists'), but the history and development of the Arabic language, mosque architecture, Muslim educational, religious, and quasi-religious institutions, simply do not bear this out. For example, in his epistle, *Ikhtilāf Mālik wa al-Shāfi'ī*, Imām al-Shāfi'ī (d. 204/820) criticizes Imām Mālik (d. 179/795) and others for relating Prophetic hadith and then abandoning them on the basis of the practice of the Rightly Guided Caliphs or the people of Medina.<sup>71</sup> Similarly, in his famous *al-Risāla*, he complains that Imām Mālik often justified positions on the basis of an alleged Medinese consensus while he himself (al-Shāfi'ī) had encountered scholars in Medina who went against this would-be consensus.<sup>72</sup> If nothing else, al-Shāfi'ī's writings indicate clearly that between the generations of the Prophet, the Rightly Guided Caliphs, and Mālik a steady process of selective endorsement was maintained, which, incidentally, al-Shāfi'ī effectively insists should be continued (albeit on a different basis, namely Prophetic hadith exclusively). Similarly, there is evidence of Gyekye's notion of processing tradition in the area of theology. For example, according to al-Ṭabarī, when Imām Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal (d. 241/855) was first asked to respond to the Caliph al-Ma'mūn's letter asserting the createdness of the Qur'ān, he is reported to have said: 'It is the word of God; I have nothing to add beyond this (*huwa kalām Allāh lā azīdu 'alayhā*).'<sup>73</sup> In time, however, it would become the standard position of the Traditionalist-Hanbalite school that the Qur'ān is emphatically the uncreated word of God, a position with which Imām Aḥmad himself would later identify. In sum, all of this supports the conclusion that Tradition, as identified by the Traditionalists, was not the result of a simple act of transmission or handing down, but rather of a process of selectively endorsing and suppressing old and new ideas and practices.

The real point of contention between Traditionalism and Rationalism is the criteria relied upon in this process of selection. The decision to drop an old pattern or admit a new one (speaking here in the context of traditions of ideas and beliefs) would be based *inter alia* upon how rationally palatable, widely

understood, or broadly appealing it was. If, however, the prism through which these questions were asked and answered was the Aristotelian-Neoplatonic tradition, much less of what had been handed down from the Arabian past would likely pass muster. From this vantage-point, Traditionalism, as noted earlier, might be defined as that movement which, in its rejection of the Aristotelian-Neoplatonic tradition, was appalled at the suggestion by those who endorsed that tradition that certain aspects of what had been handed down from the Arabian past were inferior, deleterious, or simply of little value or meaning. Yet in their own effort to distil 'Tradition' from the cumulative repertoire of beliefs and practices in circulation, Traditionalists would also rely on reason (which is why they too, and not just the proponents of *kalām*, should be considered theologians<sup>74</sup>); they simply would not rely (as a rule) on the Aristotelian-Neoplatonic (or Manichaean or Zoroastrian) tradition of reason. Rationalists, meanwhile, understanding that what was being touted as Tradition was plainly a synthetic product, proceeded on the notion that if the Traditionalists were authorized to engage in selective endorsement, so too should they be. But from a Traditionalist perspective, to cede this to the Rationalists would be to both saddle and shoe their Trojan horse. This the Traditionalists simply would not do. And their refusal to do so would heighten the utility of a rhetoric that equated Tradition with simple transmission. Ultimately, this rhetoric would go a long way in sustaining the charge and promoting the image of Rationalism as an 'innovation,' unique, irreverent, and mildly duplicitous in its selective appropriation of the legacy of the Prophet alongside that of Late Antiquity.

To hold the true source of Traditionalism's strength to reside in its 'having the authority of revelation'<sup>75</sup> is to take the Traditionalists at their word, and their ideological word at that. The real strength of Traditionalism lies in the weakness of the attribution of the Aristotelian-Neoplatonic (and other) tradition(s) to the Prophetic legacy. For on this weakness, Traditionalism emerges as the natural process of human thought and thus the natural approach to scripture that is present and

available both before and without any intentional act of acquisition.<sup>76</sup> Moreover, Traditionalism stands as a safe haven in which men can seek refuge from the perceived treachery of their own minds as the intellectualism of *kalām* reaches the point of diminishing return and the haunting disappointment of the failed promise of theological certainty sets in. This is clearly what is being alluded to in the reports of deathbed repentance by famous *mutakallims* like al-Juwaynī (d. 478/1085) and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209). As we shall see, even al-Ghazālī, who was never fully disabused of his belief in the power and basic correctness of a properly 'Islamicized' Aristotelian-Neoplatonic tradition, would be drawn in his later years to the comfort and reassurance of the simple piety of the Traditionalists, even as he would ultimately reject their rhetoric of transcendence.

#### D. THEOLOGY BETWEEN ORTHODOXY AND HERESY

At bottom, the struggle between Traditionalism and Rationalism was a struggle to determine the proper reading of scripture and to distinguish this reading from those that were to be deprecated and eschewed as improper. I have referred to these readings as 'orthodoxy' and 'heresy' (or heterodoxy) respectively. Several scholars have insisted, however, that the concept of orthodoxy is not really applicable to Islam. While I have no interest in quibbling over terms, I question the propriety of the notion that the differences between Christianity's and Islam's ways of regulating theological dissent are fundamental while the similarities between the two are not. More importantly, to deny the existence of the concept and value of orthodoxy in Islam denies us access to an important aspect of what is at stake in Muslim theological writing in general and in al-Ghazālī's *Fayṣal* in particular.



A typical representation of the view that denies the existence of orthodoxy in Islam is offered by Professor W.M. Watt:

The term 'orthodox' applies in the first place to Eastern Christendom, where there was an authority to say what was 'orthodoxy' or 'right belief' and what was 'heresy'. In Islam, however, there was no such authority. There was only the main or central body of opinion in the various schools or sections of the community. In these, too, there was not always the emphasis on the intellectual aspect of religion that there was in Eastern Christendom (though such an emphasis is sometimes found). Thus it is best in Islamic studies to avoid the term 'orthodox' and to ask instead whether there was a central body of moderate opinion.<sup>77</sup>

In my view, Professor Watt (and those who agree with him) mistakenly assumes that differences in the mechanism via which Islam and Christianity seek to regulate theological dissent precludes them from taking an identical interest in arriving at the same end. The notion that there is, properly speaking, no 'orthodoxy' in Islam is based on the idea that such an orthodoxy could only be established and sustained by an institution that was backed by *formal* authority (which as used is closer to my understanding of power<sup>78</sup>). To my mind, however, all that is needed to establish and sustain any orthodoxy is authority, full stop, which may be formal *or informal*.<sup>79</sup> That is to say, through the use of informal authority—which is based on reputation as opposed to formal investiture—religious communities can establish and sustain orthodoxy even in the absence of a formal ecclesiastical hierarchy. By ignoring, meanwhile, the effects and possibilities of informal authority, Professor Watt overlooks what every member of a religious community knows by experience: the threat of stigma, malicious gossip, ostracism, or verbal attack by respected members in the community is far more imminent, far more effective, and far more determinative of religious belief and behaviour than is the threat of formal excommunication. All of these are instruments of informal authority. And if through such instruments a community is able to regulate theological beliefs and gain public recognition for

what it deems to be 'right' as opposed to 'wrong' beliefs, I see no reason why these should be credited with any lesser status than those established by a formally constituted church or Sanhedrin.

My point in all of this is not to argue, after the fashion of Muslim apologists, that Islam was not devoid of what the now ascending civilization was known to have had. My point is rather to prepare the reader to appreciate the full gravity of what is at stake in al-Ghazālī's *Fayṣal*. Al-Ghazālī is not simply trying to gain recognition for 'a central body of moderate opinion'; he is advocating a criterion on the basis of which some people will be admitted to the Faith and others will be excluded; he is talking about right (or, more properly, acceptable) versus wrong (or unacceptable) doctrine. In short, al-Ghazālī is talking about orthodoxy and heresy. Meanwhile, the fact that he is not speaking on behalf of a formal ecclesiastical institution actually increases rather than diminishes the gravity of his enterprise. For it is precisely because there is no such institution that issues of orthodoxy and heresy are subject to being decided via a crass mobilization of biases by groups and individuals who either have informal authority of their own or are able to tap into that of someone else, a situation that is clearly open to abuse. Indeed, it was precisely this type of abuse that al-Ghazālī had in mind when he lamented,

If you attribute ■ doctrine to a person of whom the people think well and you provide proof that this doctrine actually issued from him, they will accept it, even if it is false; and if you trace a doctrine to a person of whom they think ill, they will reject it, even if it is true. Invariably, they rely on men in order to know the truth, rather than relying on the truth in order to know men.<sup>80</sup>

The cumulative effect of each group seeking to privilege its views at the expense of others' would be to expose the community to an ever upwardly spiralling litany of exaggerated and exclusivist claims. Some of these might even succeed in gaining the backing of the state.<sup>81</sup> But, more importantly, whether they did or not, these claims retained their potential as



categories of exclusion. In *Fayṣal*, al-Ghazālī is not at all concerned about running foul of any state-sponsored creed. He is deeply troubled, however, by the atmosphere of intolerance, mutual suspicion, and psychological intimidation engendered by narrow and underinclusive definitions of orthodoxy manufactured and brandished with reckless abandon. Ultimately, this was a liability that Sunni Islam would incur as a result of its decision to place the individual autonomy of the jurist-theologian over the establishment of a formal Church.<sup>82</sup> Instead of a Church, Sunnism would opt for a system of determining orthodoxy via the unanimous consensus (*ijmā'*) of the jurists-theologians. As far as theology was concerned, however, consensus would prove now too blunt an instrument to accommodate doctrinal latitude, now too porous an edifice to put a permanent end to doctrinal disputes. In the end, therefore, it would be left to individuals to put forth and champion theological views to the end of gaining the assent of the Community, with all that this entailed in the way of the aforementioned liabilities. This was a critical aspect of the broader context in which al-Ghazālī wrote *Fayṣal*, and only against this backdrop can the aim and significance of his project be fully appreciated.



# Introduction

## Part Two





## A. AL-GHAZĀLĪ: RELEVANT ASPECTS OF HIS LIFE AND TIMES

Few figures in the history of Islam have been studied with the frequency and depth of al-Ghazālī. The details of his life are well-documented and have been repeated in several books and articles on various aspects of his thought—legal, theological, philosophical, mystical. Much of this data is supplied by al-Ghazālī's 'autobiography', *al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl*. In the present section, I shall try to limit myself to those facts and details that are necessary to an adequate reading of *Fayṣal*.

Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad b. Muḥammad b. Muḥammad al-Ghazālī was born in north-east Persia in the year 450/1058. Orphaned at an early age, he began his education in his native town of Tūs, later moving to Jurjān (on the Caspian Sea) and then Nishapur, where he came under the tutelage of the great Ash'arite theologian and Shāfi'ī jurist, Imām al-Ḥaramayn al-Juwaynī (d. 478/1085). A precocious youth, he soon acquired a reputation that went beyond his immediate circle of teachers and colleagues. As a result, he was invited in 484/1091 to the capital at Baghdad by the Seljuq vizier, Nizām al-Mulk, to assume an endowed chair in Shāfi'ī law at the famous Nizāmīya college, the most prestigious institution in the eastern caliphate, if not the entire Muslim world. He was only thirty-three years old at the time (thirty-four in lunar years). He would soon become one of the most prominent men in Baghdad.

Barely four years into his tenure at the Nizāmīya, however, al-Ghazālī suffered a nervous breakdown so severe that he lost the ability to speak or eat. This had been precipitated by a painful confrontation with his own religiosity. In a most enviable feat of courage, al-Ghazālī admitted to himself that his intention

in pursuing religious knowledge had not been pure, that the pursuit of fame and status had been the motive behind all his achievements, that for all his knowledge of the religious sciences he was still not possessed of certainty, and that when all had been said and done he was religiously almost bankrupt, in his own mind, destined for Hell.<sup>83</sup> Al-Ghazālī had immersed himself in the scholarly culture of the day and had witnessed (and experienced) the corrosive effects of a rampant intellectualism in which truth often took a back seat to reputation. This engendered a certain contempt on his part for his profession, and aroused his suspicions about the limits of reason. It also contributed to the development of his belief in the superiority of what I would characterize as a 'sober Sufism,' i.e., Sufism shorn of any monism (later identified as *waḥdat al-wujūd*), antinomian tendencies, saint-*cultus* (i.e., *tawassul*, *istighātha*), and a total dependence upon a spiritual guide or *shaykh*. Determined to find spiritual solace and restore his relationship with God, al-Ghazālī decided, some time towards the end of 488/1095, to abandon his professional career and to leave Baghdad. Travelling as a mendicant Sufi, he visited several cities, including Damascus, Jerusalem, Hebron, Mecca, and Medina, where he spent long hours in contemplation and spiritual exercises. Then, at the end of 499/1106, after a sojourn of more than ten years, he decided to return to Nishapur.<sup>84</sup> It was here that he wrote *Fayṣal al-tafrīqa*, just around the turn of the 6th/12th century.<sup>85</sup> He died only a few years later, in 505/1111.

## 1. THE *IḤYĀ'* AND THE CULTURE OF THE '*ULAMĀ'*

It was during this ten-year period of self-imposed exile and reassessment that al-Ghazālī wrote one of his most famous and influential works, *Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn* (*Revival of the Religious Sciences*). This was a multi-faceted work, a voluminous commentary on the overall state of Muslim religious life and learning. It dealt with everything from ethics to theology, from law to mysticism, from psychology to history and more. To my

mind, however, the real significance of the *Iḥyā'* emerges when it is read not as a work on theology or mysticism or law, but as a social commentary of the genre of Ibn al-Jawzī's *Talbīs Iblīs* (*The Devil's Delusions*)<sup>86</sup> or Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī's *Mu'īd al-ni'am wa mubīd al-niqam* (*Retrieving God's Bounty and Averting His Scorn*).<sup>87</sup> For in the *Iḥyā'*, in addition to al-Ghazālī the consummate scholar, we see al-Ghazālī the 'public intellectual', who begins not with the punctilios of academe, but with his own experience and the desire to use his knowledge to improve his and other people's lives rather than simply add to the body of accumulated scholarship in a given field. This orientation would remain with him for the rest of his life. And it would inform *Fayṣal*, and probably everything he wrote after leaving Baghdad, in a most fundamental way.

Most immediately relevant to the concerns expressed in *Fayṣal* is al-Ghazālī's critique of the scholarly culture that had developed among the '*ulamā'*'. In the *Iḥyā'*, he castigated those he referred to as the 'scholars of worldly gain ('*ulamā' al-dunyā*') and the 'scholars of iniquity ('*ulamā' al-sū'*)'. These were scholars who used their religious knowledge as a means to social domination and worldly gain, as opposed to its intended purpose of promoting God-consciousness and a concern with the Hereafter.<sup>88</sup> While initially limited to a minority, this mentality had grown to infect the entire religious establishment, which was tragically sliding into an abyss of egotistical one-upmanship. Now, almost as a matter of survival, a scholar's aim had to be to silence his adversaries and sustain his own superiority. And in his pursuit thereof he could spare nothing, including the use of forced and convoluted dialectics and *ad hominem* diatribes. Even when he knew his opponent was right, rather than acknowledge his error, the scholarly culture dictated that he find a way to save face. Otherwise, he might be looking at a life of juristic and intellectual desuetude. In his classic study of Muslim education, Professor George Makdisi describes the situation as follows:



A Muslim scholar...could not hope for the time when he could receive the doctoral degree and thus come to the end of his struggle to the top. He had to prove himself at every turn. To have a successful academic career, he had first to rise to the top and then maintain his position there. His situation was similar to the gunman in the American films called 'Westerns' who was a target for all newcomers aspiring to his position; or to the champion boxer, who was to defend his title against all contenders. And this he did in the arena of disputation.<sup>89</sup>

Al-Ghazālī's critique confirms Professor Makdisi's portrayal and adds a socio-economic dimension. According to al-Ghazālī, ambitious minds flocked to the religious sciences because this was the most effective means to social status, power, and the largesse of the rich. At one point, for example, he complains that the surfeited concentration on jurisprudence—especially dialectics and the more 'exotic' aspects of the law—had resulted in a critical shortage of Muslim medical doctors. This was despite the fact that, according to the religious law itself, there was a communal obligation (*farḍ kifāya*) to maintain the needed number of Muslim doctors. Yet, al-Ghazālī points out, none of the religious scholars spoke out against this imbalance. And the reason for this was as obvious as it was lamentable.

How many towns are there that are devoid of Muslim doctors, while it is not permissible to accept the expert testimony of non-Muslims in cases involving the religious law. Yet, we do not see anyone devoting himself to the study of medicine. Instead, they fall over each other in pursuit of jurisprudence, especially dialectics and the art of disputation, despite the fact that there is an abundance of jurists who can issue legal opinions and address the issues of the day. I wish I knew how the jurists could sanction the undertaking of communal obligations that are already being met to the neglect of communal obligations that are not being met. Is there any reason for this other than the fact that the study of medicine does not provide easy access to executorships of religious endowments, bequests and estates of orphans or to judgeships, government positions, superiority over one's peers and power over one's enemies?<sup>90</sup>

Al-Ghazālī's disillusionment with the culture of the 'ulamā' was part of the reason he left Baghdad to begin with. This critical predisposition would remain with him throughout his self-imposed exile and follow him back to Nishapur. There, one last time, he would return to the classroom and, alas, to young and inexperienced minds drunk with dreams of clerical superstardom and armed with inherited and unqualified categories of exclusion with which to promote their cause. As we shall see, the ease and frequency with which scholars and their disciples hurled around charges of Unbelief would consume the bulk of al-Ghazālī's attention in *Fayṣal*. This, by far, would form the most critical dimension of the immediate context in which that work was written.

Generally speaking, the importance of the *Ihyā'* to a proper reading of *Fayṣal* has not been recognized, and when it has it has been read as a work on theology or mysticism, and its public intellectual side has been ignored. I. Bello, for example, ignores the *Ihyā'* and holds *Fayṣal* to have been primarily a legal work 'that explains the grounds on which someone, or more specifically the philosophers, should be charged with heresy'.<sup>91</sup> W.M. Watt, who recognizes the importance of the *Ihyā'*, says that *Fayṣal* was a work on 'dogmatic theology' that was 'partly directed against the Bāṭiniya, but is mainly a defence of his [al-Ghazālī's] own views on the extent to which *ta'wīl* is justified, and on the relative places of *tawātur* and *idjmā* 'as sources of religious knowledge'.<sup>92</sup> R. Frank sees *Fayṣal* as an apologetic for al-Ghazālī's rejection of *kalām*, specifically Ash'arism, in favour of a 'higher theology,' which he introduced in the *Ihyā'* and whose legitimacy he sought to confirm in *Fayṣal*, 'not merely as a valid interpretation of the Koran and Traditions, but as the intellectually most thorough and exact conceptual exposition of their deeper meaning'.<sup>93</sup>

To my mind, these readings all fail to capture the most important and driving element in *Fayṣal*, namely its ecumenical mission. While it is true that the philosophers come in for severe criticism, they take up only a few pages of *Fayṣal*. The Bāṭiniya are also criticized (and basically dismissed as buffoons), but

they too take up no more than a few pages. By comparison, al-Ghazālī's criticisms of certain Sufi groups is much harsher than that of the Bāṭinīya. And his treatment of the excesses of the *mutakallimūn* is longer than his treatment of the Bāṭinīya or the philosophers. The same is true of the section on God-fearing non-Muslims, especially Christians, in search of the truth. As for *Fayṣal*'s primary aim being to defend al-Ghazālī's theological idiosyncrasies, including his 'higher theology',<sup>94</sup> the brevity and generality of the work would hardly seem to support this. Moreover, there is nothing in the *ta'wīl* defended in *Fayṣal* that is peculiarly Ghazālīan; nor do al-Ghazālī's criticisms of *kalām* necessitate a rejection of Ash'arism;<sup>95</sup> nor is there any explicit mention of '*ilm al-mukāshafā* (higher theology)<sup>96</sup>' in *Fayṣal*, and *ma'rifa* (gnosis), its functional equivalent, is mentioned only thrice (in the same section) in the entire work. It is true that al-Ghazālī implies that the way of the theologians falls short of providing for a religiosity of true fulfilment. But this could be found in writers as different from al-Ghazālī as the arch-Traditionalist Ibn Taymīya (d. 728/1328). At any rate, this is hardly the main target of *Fayṣal*. In sum, there is little concrete evidence in *Fayṣal* to suggest that it is primarily a defence of al-Ghazālī. On the contrary, *Fayṣal* was an attempt to defend the community against a veritable cyclone of charges and counter-charges of Unbelief.

This ecumenical dimension of *Fayṣal*, while escaping the attention of contemporary scholars, did catch the eye of Ignaz Goldziher almost a century ago. At that time Goldziher described *Fayṣal* as 'a special work on the idea of tolerance'.

In it he [al-Ghazālī] proclaims to the world of Islam the view that agreement on the fundamental principles of religion is the basis for recognizing persons as *believers*, and that differences on matters of dogma and ritual, even if it involves the rejection of the caliphate recognized in Sunni Islam and consequently the Shī'ite schism, does not provide grounds for excommunication.<sup>97</sup>

To my mind, this is the only reading to which a close and careful analysis of *Fayṣal* will inevitably lead. Indeed, on such

an analysis, it is difficult, al-Ghazālī's admittedly numerous digressions notwithstanding, to miss this central thrust and preoccupation of *Fayṣal*.

## 2. 'ABD AL-QĀHIR AL-BAGHDĀDĪ

Perhaps al-Ghazālī's concern with intolerance in *Fayṣal* was obscured by the lack of any mention therein of individuals whose activities might have been the direct target of his effort. There is, however, at least one figure from 5th/11th century Baghdad who stands out for special consideration in this regard. This was the Shāfi'ī-Ash'arite jurist, theologian and heresiographer, 'Abd al-Qāhir al-Baghdādī (d. 429/1037). Al-Baghdādī had written two important works, one on theology, *Uṣūl al-dīn* (*Principles of the Religion*), the other on heresiology, *al-Farq bayna al-firaq* (*The Differences Between the Sects*). As a prominent figure among both Ash'arites and Shāfi'īs, al-Baghdādī's works would exert an enormous influence upon both groups—especially up-and-coming hopefuls looking to prove themselves. At the same time, the period between his death and al-Ghazālī's coming to Baghdad in 484/1091 was just enough time for al-Baghdādī's views to incubate *en route* to becoming a full-blown ideological platform. With Baghdad as the political, cultural, and intellectual capital of the Muslim world, al-Baghdādī's influence was destined to reach far and wide. And while there was nothing new or, in and of itself, insidious about a scholar wielding this kind of influence, serious problems would emerge from the fact that al-Baghdādī happened to be an inveterate fanatic. He recognized no such thing as material heresy,<sup>98</sup> and no one, save those within his narrow circle of Ash'arite 'orthodoxy', was safe from the charge of Unbelief.

According to al-Baghdādī, it was 'incumbent to condemn all of the leaders of the Mu'tazilites as Unbelievers'.<sup>99</sup> The Karrāmīya were Unbelievers because, according to al-Baghdādī, they believed that God reconstitutes our bodies at Resurrection,

rather than resurrect us in the bodies we inhabit now.<sup>100</sup> Furthermore,

none of those who differ with us [Ash'arites], including the Qadarites, the Khārijites, the Rāfidites, the Jahmites, the Najjārites and the Corporealists (*jismiyya*) [often a code-name for Traditionalists] can be said to have committed a single act of obedience to God, because the object of their alleged obedience is not our God.<sup>101</sup>

Interestingly, this same argument was pressed by the Ash'arite turned Mu'tazilite contemporary of al-Baghdādī, al-Qāḍī 'Abd al-Jabbār.<sup>102</sup> Meanwhile, the Mu'tazilite al-Jubbā'ī (d. 303/915) had defined obedience as 'following the will of another'. This implied, according to al-Baghdādī, that when God answers the prayer of a servant, He obeys the latter. Al-Jubbā'ī was thus guilty of Unbelief.<sup>103</sup> Even those who held correct beliefs but were not sure that they could successfully defend them against rational attack were subject, according to al-Baghdādī, to being condemned as Unbelievers.<sup>104</sup> And the list went on and on.

Besides the rigidity and lack of consideration with which al-Baghdādī applies his theological litmus test, there is another aspect to his approach that becomes a pivotal point for al-Ghazālī in *Fayṣal*. Some of the people al-Baghdādī condemned as Unbelievers were not the least guilty of having questioned or rejected any basic tenet of Islam or even a single text of the Qur'ān or Sunna. They had simply embraced rational doctrines (perhaps on a secondary or even a tertiary matter) that, in al-Baghdādī's view, led to a wrong conclusion or threatened the integrity of the Rationalist system as a whole. For example, al-Aṣamm (d. 200-1/816-18) was condemned as an Unbeliever because he did not believe in (philosophical) accidents (*a'rāḍ*/s. *'araḍ*).<sup>105</sup> Clearly, this was not an issue connected with his acceptance of Qur'ān or Sunna, and it reflected nothing at all about al-Aṣamm's attitude towards God or revelation. Yet al-Baghdādī saw it as ample grounds for condemning al-Aṣamm as an Unbeliever.



Al-Baghdādī cites all of these judgements in the name of ‘our scholars (*aṣḥābunā*)’. At first blush, it is not clear whether he is referring to Ash‘arites or Shāfi‘īs or both. His inclusion under this designation, however, of the Mālikī al-Bāqillānī (d. 403/1013) clearly indicates that the reference is to Ash‘arites.<sup>106</sup> Given, however, the relationship between Ash‘arism and Shāfi‘ism (the Shāfi‘ī school had traditionally been home to the leading Ash‘arites<sup>107</sup>), these views probably spread throughout Shāfi‘ī circles, where they approached the status of school doctrine. Al-Ghazālī, meanwhile, had almost certainly read al-Baghdādī’s works; we know, for instance, that he relied on *al-Farq bayna al-firaq* for his *Faḍā’ih al-bāṭiniyya* (*Scandals of the Bāṭinites*).<sup>108</sup> But as a Shāfi‘ī and an Ash‘arite student and teacher, al-Ghazālī probably also came into direct contact with the effects of al-Baghdādī’s views, particularly upon young people, first in Baghdad<sup>109</sup> and then upon his return to Nishapur. Meanwhile, especially in Baghdad, there was the Traditionalist response to all of this, the ferocity of which is reflected in the staunchly Traditionalist content and repeated public readings of the state-sponsored Qādirī Creed, the signatories to which declared: ‘This is the profession of faith of the Muslims; he who is opposed to it is a transgressor of the law and an infidel.’<sup>110</sup> For his part, al-Ghazālī would be more intimately connected to and thus more psychologically disturbed by the excesses of Rationalism, aspects of which he himself would have to struggle to overcome. This goes a long way to explaining why it is primarily the extremism of Rationalists that he portrays in *Fayṣal* and why Rationalists occupy the bulk of his attention throughout that work.

## B. FAYṢAL AL-TAFRIQA

There are actually two targets in *Fayṣal*, one primary, the other secondary. The primary target is the extremists, who refuse to recognize any theological interpretation other than their own. The secondary target is the Crypto-infidels (*zanādiqa/s. zindīq*),



who hide behind figurative interpretation (*ta'wīl*) in order to conceal their opposition to the religion of the Prophet. Since, according to al-Ghazālī, figurative interpretation plays a role in the theology of every group, there must be a criterion to distinguish those figurative interpretations that should be accorded recognition from those that should be exposed as attempts to conceal Unbelief. This is the purpose of *Fayṣal*, whence its title, *The Decisive Criterion for Distinguishing Islam from Masked Infidelity*. Against the extremists, al-Ghazālī will argue that the domain of acceptable theological interpretation is much broader than they allow. Against the Crypto-infidels, however, he will maintain that it is not broad enough to cover their machinations. In the end, the argument against the Crypto-infidels is really for the purpose of establishing the outer limits of his criterion for acceptable belief. It is not a part of a direct and sustained campaign against deistic and atheistic philosophers (*al-falāsifa*) *per se*.

## 1. THE EXTREMISTS

*Fayṣal* opens with a question, presumably from a student, about the propriety of the charge—apparently levelled by another student—that al-Ghazālī has written works that contradict the doctrine of the master-theologians, particularly those of the Ash'arite school, and that to go against that school, even in the smallest of details, is an act of Unbelief (*kufr*). Al-Ghazālī responds that there is nothing new in this use of *kufr* as a category of exclusion to silence and discredit people; indeed, the Prophet Muhammad was himself ridiculed and dismissed as a common madman. In addition, however, al-Ghazālī counsels against investing these charges with any credence because they issue from people who are steeped in envy and the pursuit of worldly gain, people

whose god (*ilāh*) is their undisciplined passions (*hawā*), whose object of worship (*ma'būd*) is their leaders, whose direction of

prayer (*qibla*) is the *dinār*, whose religious law is their own frivolity, whose will (*irāda*) is the promotion of reputation and carnal pleasures, whose worship (*‘ibāda*) is the service they render the rich among them, whose remembrance (of God) is the devilish whisperings of their own souls...

In reality, the young man who brought forth this charge was neither a seeker of truth nor a protector thereof; he was merely an overzealous, sophomoric sycophant who equated knowledge with the ability to parrot views picked up and swallowed whole at lectures and disputation sessions. Egotistical and demophobic, he was a typical product of the culture that al-Ghazālī had so strongly criticized in the *Ihyā’*.

As al-Ghazālī proceeds to answer the question more directly, it is clear that his response is informed by the absence of an ecclesiastical hierarchy. He begins by asking why this young man, or the Ash‘arites, should enjoy a monopoly over the truth such that their claims against their adversaries should have any more validity than those of their adversaries against them. If the Ash‘arites can brand the Ḥanbalites or the Mu‘tazilites as Unbelievers, why should this privilege be denied to the latter against the Ash‘arites? And why should the Ash‘arites be any more justified in branding the likes of al-Bāqillānī an Unbeliever because of his position on God’s possessing the attribute of eternity than the latter would be in branding the Ash‘arites Unbelievers for their position on that question. This latter line of questioning, incidentally, was actually part of a divide-and-conquer strategy on al-Ghazālī’s part. For al-Bāqillānī had been a master speculative theologian, reportedly a pupil of al-Ash‘arī himself, who was held in high esteem in the Ash‘arite school. And while he differed with the Ash‘arites on whether eternity was an attribute *added to* or *inherent in* God’s essence, even the likes of al-Baghdādī would acknowledge him as ‘one of our [Ash‘arite] scholars (*aṣḥābunā*)’. But if al-Bāqillānī could escape condemnation for going against the Ash‘arites, why should this be denied to others, including Mu‘tazilites and Hanbalites? Why, for example, should the Mu‘tazilites be

condemned as Unbelievers for denying the divine attributes such as knowledge or power, while fully acknowledging that 'God is knowing and has knowledge of all things, and that He is powerful and has power over all possibilities?' Was not their position on these attributes in effect the same as that of al-Bāqillānī on the attribute of eternity? Unfortunately, al-Ghazālī intimates, this habit of appealing to double standards was common among theologians of his time.<sup>111</sup> And in their zeal to press their cause, some of them actually ended up in greater error than those they sought to condemn. Thus, al-Ghazālī admonishes,

If you are fair, you will probably know that one who gives any particular thinker a monopoly over the truth is himself closer to being guilty of Unbelief...because he puts this thinker in the position of the Prophet, who alone is exempt from committing errors (in doctrine) and through whom alone faith (*īmān*) obtains by agreeing with him and Unbelief (*kufr*) obtains by disagreeing with him.

After exposing the biased and arbitrary nature of the various charges and counter-charges of Unbelief, al-Ghazālī invites his interlocutor to consider his criterion for Unbelief. He indicates that neither time nor space will allow him to provide a full explication but that, even in its adumbrated form, this definition should suffice as

a means of avoiding the error of condemning various groups as Unbelievers and of casting aspersions on the people of Islam—however much their ways may differ—while they hold fast to the statement, 'There is no god but God; Muhammad is His messenger,' being sincere therein and not categorically contradicting it in any way.

Unbelief (*kufr*), according to al-Ghazālī, is '*to deem anything the Prophet brought to be a lie,*' just as faith (*īmān*) is '*to deem everything he brought to be true.*' On this definition, Jews and Christians are Unbelievers because they deem one or more of the prophets to be a liar. Atheists, meanwhile, along with Deists, Dualists, Associationists, and Crypto-Infidels, are Unbelievers on *a fortiori* grounds. As applied to Muslims, this criterion

would be qualified by the stipulation that this 'deeming to be a lie' be in connection with one of the fundamental principles (*uṣūl*) of the Faith. These, according to al-Ghazālī, are three: 1) the existence and oneness of God; 2) the prophethood of the Prophet Muhammad; and 3) the reality of the Last Day. While this stipulation is not actually introduced until more than halfway through *Fayṣal*, thematically it constitutes al-Ghazālī's first line of defence. For, according to al-Ghazālī, everything besides these three fundamentals is secondary and cannot, as such, be taken as a basis for passing a judgement of Unbelief. In his words, *'there should be no branding any person an Unbeliever over any secondary issue whatsoever, as a matter of principle.'* Among these secondary issues al-Ghazālī includes such things as some of the far-fetched interpretations of the Bāṭinites or the Twelver Shi'ite doctrine on the Imāmate. On al-Ghazālī's depiction, some of the interpretations of the Bāṭinites border on the psychedelic. Even so, he insists, as long as these are not connected with a fundamental of creed, they cannot be taken as a basis for condemning them as Unbelievers. Similarly, the Twelver Shi'ite doctrine on the Imāmate might be silly, even heinous, but it does not involve accusing the Prophet of lying, nor is it connected with any of the fundamentals of the Faith. As such, it cannot be taken as a basis for charging Twelver Shi'ites with Unbelief.

Al-Ghazālī notes that there is one exception to this rule. This involves secondary beliefs that have been handed down from the Prophet via diffuse congruence or *tawātur*. *Tawātur* is a modality of transmitting reports from the past via so many different channels that it is inconceivable that those transmitting them could be mistaken or could have colluded to perpetrate an act of intentional deception. Examples of *tawātur* are reflected in our knowledge of distant places, such as China or Australia, or, according to Muslim tradition, the entire text of the Qur'ān. Now, al-Ghazālī's point in adding this exception is that *tawātur* virtually guarantees the integrity of a report.<sup>112</sup> As such, if a statement is related on the authority of the Prophet via *tawātur*, one can only conclude that the Prophet actually made it. Thus,

to reject such a report, or to deem its contents to be false, would be in effect to reject the authority of the Prophet or to deem him to have lied. In other words, the justification for passing a judgement of Unbelief regarding a secondary doctrine that has been transmitted via *tawātur* is not that the person so judged has erred on that secondary issue *per se*, but that he has effectively rejected the Prophet or accused him of delivering lies. Examples of this would be to deny that the Ka'ba at Mecca is actually the House of God towards which the Prophet turned in prayer and to which he made the pilgrimage, or that 'Ā'isha was innocent of the charges of adultery made against her, following her exoneration by the Qur'ān.

Having said this much, al-Ghazālī moves quickly to pre-empt any abuse of this exception and to reinforce the limits of what it actually allows by stating explicitly that secondary beliefs transmitted via isolated (*aḥādī*) reports (i.e., reports whose transmission does not meet the definition of *tawātur*) cannot be taken as a basis for passing judgements of Unbelief. They may be a cause for charging a person with unsanctioned innovation (*bid'a*)—but only if the views he espouses threaten to confuse the minds of the masses or to lead to public disorder. Other than this, however, errors regarding secondary doctrines handed down through isolated reports should simply be pointed out and corrected without prejudice.

Related to the issue of secondary doctrines handed down via *tawātur* is that of secondary beliefs that are backed by unanimous consensus (*ijmā'*). Here al-Ghazālī is a bit less explicit. What he seems to be saying, however, is that, in theory, error or intentional flouting of such beliefs could be a basis for a judgement of Unbelief. In practice, however, *ijmā'* is itself so fraught with controversy and ambiguity that it would be difficult to commit wholeheartedly to such a judgement. For, on the one hand, he notes, some scholars, such as al-Nazzām (d. ca. 220-230/835-45) (and one could add others, like Ibn Ḥazm (d. 456/1063) denied that *ijmā'* was even an authoritative source.<sup>113</sup> On the other hand, scholars like Abū Bakr al-Fārisī (?d. 305/922),



who recognized *ijmā'*, were known to have made claims of consensus for which they were either criticized or contradicted.

Again, this minimalist criterion for being considered a Muslim was al-Ghazālī's first line of defence against the extremists. In reality, however, he understood that these were precarious fortifications, given the ease with which the charge of deeming the Prophet to be a liar, even on a secondary issue transmitted via isolated reports, could be conflated with a denial of his prophethood altogether—a primary issue indeed. On this recognition, the bulk of al-Ghazālī's attention would be devoted to refuting the theologians' charges and counter-charges of deeming the Prophet to have lied, period, by showing that these charges were based on a fundamental misunderstanding of 'deeming to be a lie', and hence a misapplication of the definition of *kufr*.

According to al-Ghazālī, all the schools grounded their charge of Unbelief against the others in the accusation that the latter had contradicted the statement, 'There is no god but God; Muhammad is His messenger.' This was effected through their having deemed the Prophet to have delivered lies. When the Ash'arite denied the possibility of God's mounting the Throne, the Traditionalist-Ḥanbalite accused him of implying that the Prophet lied when he stated in the Qur'ān, '*The Merciful mounted the Throne (al-raḥmān 'alā al-arsh istawā)*'. When the Ḥanbalite insisted on the literal meaning of such verses, the Ash'arite accused him of implying that the Prophet lied when he said, 'Nothing is anything like Him (*laysa ka mithlihi shay*)', which the Ash'arite took to be a blanket denial of anthropomorphism and the possibility of accidents, such as motion, inhering in the divine. The Ash'arite accuses the Mu'tazilite of implying that the Prophet lied when he spoke of the divine attributes, which the Mu'tazilite denies. The Mu'tazilite, meanwhile, accuses the Ash'arite of implying that the Prophet lied when he taught of monotheism (*tawḥīd*), since any divine attributes would have to be co-eternal with God, which would result in a multiplicity of eternals. Ultimately, according to al-Ghazālī, all of these charges revolved around each group's understanding of



what it meant to deem a statement to be false (*takdhīb*) and what it meant to deem it to be true (*taṣḍīq*). His aim, therefore, would be to explain *takdhīb* and *taṣḍīq* in a way that pre-empted this otherwise inevitable conflict.

To deem a statement to be a lie is to deny that it is true. To deem a statement to be true, however, according to al-Ghazālī, is merely to acknowledge the existence (*wujūd*) of its referent. Existence, meanwhile, can be perceived (and thus acknowledged) on five levels: 1) ontological (*dhātī*); 2) sensory (*ḥissī*); 3) conceptual (*khayālī*); 4) noetic (*‘aqlī*); and 5) analogous (*shabahī*). According to al-Ghazālī, it is only because of their obliviousness to this fact of multiple levels of perception that the various groups persist in accusing each other of deeming the Prophet to have lied. After establishing, therefore, that these five levels are not his invention but are recognized, willy-nilly, throughout the community, al-Ghazālī announces his solution to the problem.

Know that everyone who interprets a statement of the Lawgiver in accordance with one of the preceding levels (of existence) has deemed such statements to be true. ‘Deeming a statement to be a lie (*takdhīb*),’ on the other hand, is to deny its correspondence to any of these levels and to claim that it represents no reality at all, that it is a pure lie, and that the Lawgiver’s aim in delivering it was simply to deceive people or to promote the (putative) common good (*maṣlaḥa*). This is pure Unbelief (*kufṛ*) and masked infidelity (*zandaqa*). Other than this, however, it is improper to brand as an Unbeliever anyone who engages in figurative interpretation, as long as he observes the Rule of Figurative Interpretation (*Qānūn al-ta’wīl*)...

The five levels of existence correspond to a descending hierarchy of literalness, with ontological (*dhātī*) being literal in the strict sense, sensory (*ḥissī*) representing the first level of figurative existence, and analogous (*shabahī*) representing the most remote. When interpreting statements of the Prophet, one must begin with the ontological level. If the statement can be sustained as true on that level one cannot move to a level of

figurative existence. If, however, the statement cannot be sustained on the ontological level, one must move to the most proximate level of figurative existence. Only if the statement cannot be sustained on the more proximate level can one move to a more remote level of figurative existence. This is what al-Ghazālī refers to as the Rule of Figurative Interpretation (*Qānūn al-ta'wīl*), i.e., that one can move to a lower level of existence only if a Prophetic statement proves to be unsustainable on the higher level.

In the interest of space, one example of how this system works will have to serve.<sup>114</sup> As mentioned, the first level of figurative existence is the sensory (*ḥissī*) level. The difference between sensory existence and ontological existence is that a thing may appear to the senses in one way whereas its ontological reality is different, or it may not exist ontologically at all. For example, on the level of the senses, the sun appears to rise and set and to revolve around the earth. In reality, however, the sun neither rises nor sets nor revolves around the earth. Al-Ghazālī's point is that, speaking from the perspective of the senses, a person would be justified in deeming a statement to the effect that the sun rises or sets to be true. Ontologically speaking, however, such a statement would be deemed false. On this understanding, a person who knows nothing about astronomy might deem—in fact, must deem, according to al-Ghazālī—a verse like, 'And you see the sun when it rises scale the right side of their cave, and when it sets it spikes them on their left,' (18:17) to be literally (i.e., ontologically) true. One versed in astronomy, on the other hand, would be justified in deeming this verse to be literally false and only sensorily true. Since, however, neither party denies the truth of the verse on all levels or without justification, neither can be charged with deeming the Prophet to have lied.

At bottom, this approach reflected al-Ghazālī's recognition that interpretation consists of two parts: 1) the statement to be interpreted and; 2) a psychological prism or set of presuppositions against which the statement must be made to 'make sense'. If, on these presuppositions, a literal interpretation makes sense,

the interpreter will stop there (unless he has other reasons for wanting to avoid such an interpretation). If, on the other hand, a literal interpretation does not make sense, the interpreter will search for ways of bringing the statement into conformity with this basic desideratum. Based on this observation, al-Ghazālī insists that the real contention between the theological schools is not over any difference in their respective levels of commitment to scripture, but rather over what each recognizes and accepts as a justification for moving from one level of interpretation to the next. This is the very heart of al-Ghazālī's system, which is supported by two main contentions.

First, al-Ghazālī refutes the notion that the difference between Traditionalism and Rationalism is that the latter accepts and engages in figurative interpretation (*ta'wīl*) while the former refuses to do so, restricting itself in all cases to the literal meaning of scripture. According to al-Ghazālī, the real difference between these two approaches is one of degree, not kind. In this regard, he points out that even Imām Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, the man most notoriously and adamantly opposed to figurative interpretation, resorted to *ta'wīl* in his interpretation of a number of hadith. For example, he did not take the Black Stone to be literally the right hand of God; nor did he hold to a literal understanding of 'the two fingers of the All-Merciful' between which the heart of the Believer is said to rest. It is true, and al-Ghazālī makes no attempt to hide it, that Imām Aḥmad rarely resorted to *ta'wīl*. But this, according to al-Ghazālī, was only because he rarely saw any need or justification for doing so.

This brings us to the second contention. According to al-Ghazālī, the reason that Imām Aḥmad rarely saw any need or justification for resorting to figurative interpretation had less to do with any connection in his mind between literalness and truth *per se* than it did with the interpretive presuppositions with which he approached revelation. In other words, Imām Aḥmad was simply not exposed, or did not subscribe, to the Aristotelian-Neoplatonic-inspired tradition of speculative rationalism (*al-naẓar al-'aqlī*). As a result, he did not labour under its presuppositions. Had Imām Aḥmad been versed in that

tradition, the logical impossibility of many other reports, such as those implying God's aboveness, would have appeared to him and prompted him to resort more often to *ta'wīl*. Imām Aḥmad's difference with the *mutakallimūn*, in other words, is again one of degree, not kind. And in this context, Traditionalism and Rationalism can be seen to be, in effect, different applications of one and the same approach.

Now, al-Ghazālī's aim is not to defend one set of presuppositions over any other, such that *ta'wīl* emerges as a more or less frequent and justifiable option. His aim is merely to point out that the presence or absence of a particular set of presuppositions is, *ceteris paribus*, an accident of history that has nothing to do with one's level of religious commitment. To al-Ghazālī's mind, it was just as natural for any of his contemporaries to be possessed of ('Islamicized') Aristotelian-Neoplatonic presuppositions as it would be for anyone today to have a basic knowledge of astronomy. At the same time, however, just as many people in our time may not have access to quality education or may harbour misgivings towards science as the perceived agent and handiwork of their oppressors, so might people in his day be oblivious or negatively predisposed to the Aristotelian-Neoplatonic tradition. To be sure, these differential endowments would lead inevitably to differences in interpretation. In the end, however, one might be no more justified in condemning a Rationalist or a Traditionalist interpretation than one would be in condemning either party in the aforementioned example of the sun rising and setting.

Again, this is not to claim immunity for all presuppositions or the interpretations to which they lead. It is merely to point out that the real focal point of any inquiry into a person's faith must be their 'attitude' or predisposition toward God and revelation, not their acumen in the highly sophisticated enterprise of theological interpretation. A stupid, uneducated, or even overly cerebral person who loves God and approaches scripture in a spirit of complete resignation may emerge with crude, counter-intuitive, or outlandish theological interpretations. But these would appear so only to those who do not share their

interpretive presuppositions. And in such circumstances, the attempt to invoke tradition as impartial judge—i.e., in its capacity as heir to sacred *cum* presuppositionless time—cannot, as we have seen, conceal the fact that the mechanism via which tradition itself remains tradition is indebted to a set of presuppositions.<sup>115</sup> In the end, there simply are no presuppositionless interpretations. Moreover, stupidity and ignorance are no more synonymous with Unbelief than intelligence and education are with faith. A person's faith simply cannot be judged solely on the basis of his or her theological interpretations. Certainly the mere act of engaging in or refusing to engage in *tawīl* cannot provide an adequate basis for a judgement of Unbelief.

Ultimately, al-Ghazālī's position presages the one later echoed by the redoubtable Traditionalist Ibn Taymīya, who also had deep ecumenical concerns and who insisted that, in addition to the *content* of a doctrine, the *attitude* of its advocate was material in substantiating a charge of Unbelief, a fact unfortunately lost, according to him, on many of the 'ulamā'. According to Ibn Taymīya,

Many of those who discuss issues of faith and Unbelief in order to condemn the people of undisciplined passions (*ahl al-ahwā'*) as Unbelievers are not mindful of this principle, and they do not distinguish between what appears to be a person's status and what actually is their status (*al-ḥukm al-ẓāhir wa al-bāṭin*), despite the fact that the difference between the two is well established by many diffusely congruent (*mutawātir*) reports and known consensus. In fact, this is known *a priori* to be part of the religion of Islam. And anyone who considers this carefully will know that many of the people of undisciplined passions and unsanctioned innovations (*bida'is. bid'a*) may be ignorant, wrong-minded Believers who have simply veered away from some aspect of what the Prophet brought (*mu'min mukhṭi' jāhil dāll 'an ba'd mā jā'a bihi al-rasūl*), just as they may be Hypocrites and Crypto-infidels who pretend to be other than what they are.<sup>116</sup>

One should not understand from all of this that al-Ghazālī is secretly committed to a theology of fallibism or esoteric



subjectivism. Al-Ghazālī is not saying that there is no such thing as absolute truth, nor that truth is purely a matter of perspective. In fact, one of the main points of *Fayṣal* is that, while presuppositions may initially inform all interpretations, there is a fundamental distinction between presuppositions and logical proof (*burhān*). The licence to engage in figurative interpretation, moreover, or to move from one level of existence to the next, is not granted simply on the recognition of the inevitable presence and role of presuppositions. Rather, this requires *logical proof*! What al-Ghazālī advocates, therefore, is that the theologians come together and subject all presuppositions to critical examination and accord recognition only to those that meet their mutually agreed-upon standard of logical proof. He nominates his own works *al-Qiṣṭās al-mustaqīm* and *Mihakk al-naẓar* as blueprints, or perhaps starting points, in this regard. Of course, al-Ghazālī suffered no delusions about the real possibilities of such an ecumenical event. In the absence thereof, therefore, his two-tiered ‘Decisive Criterion’ would be there to stave off the *ad infinitum* charges of Unbelief.

## 2. THE CRYPTO-INFIDELS

The first tier of al-Ghazālī’s minimalist criterion for considering a person a Muslim would ostensibly insulate the majority of theologians from charges of Unbelief. The second tier, wherein he explicates the true meaning of *takdhīb* and *taṣḍīq*, would supply additional insulation for secondary issues. This two-tiered system would have the opposite effect, however, on a group collectively identified as ‘*al-zanādiqa/s. zindīq*’. For the *zanādiqa*, according to al-Ghazālī, proffered interpretations that went beyond the five levels of existence and, more importantly, compromised the literal meaning of fundamental tenets of Faith. For al-Ghazālī, however, the problem was not simply that the *zanādiqa* went beyond the boundaries of acceptable *ta’wīl* (i.e., on the basis of well-intentioned, honest mistakes); the problem was that they sought to immunize what they knew to contradict



the basic teachings of Islam by appealing to the method of *ta'wīl*. This, according to al-Ghazālī, was nothing more than a facile attempt to conceal their rejection of the religion of the Prophet. Thus, their appeals to figurative interpretation notwithstanding, he charged them flat out with Unbelief.

Contrary to what has been commonly assumed, al-Ghazālī's target in attacking the *zanādiqa* was neither 'godlessness', 'heresy', or even 'unbelief' in and of themselves. Al-Ghazālī was not interested in atheists who proclaimed their atheism outright; nor was he particularly perturbed by 'simple heresies' such as Mu'tazilism; nor would he have included a schism like Sikhism, as long as the latter identified itself as a separate religion. Al-Ghazālī's concern was rather with Unbelief that attempted to pass itself off as falling within the boundaries of Islam. He used the term *zanādiqa* to refer not simply to heretics, or even atheists, but to 'Crypto-infidels,' which is why I translate *zandaqa* (the verbal noun) as 'masked infidelity'. Indeed, its flare and flashiness notwithstanding, *Fayṣal*'s title was both calculated and precise: *The Decisive Criterion for Distinguishing Islam*, i.e., acceptable interpretation, *from Masked Infidelity*, i.e., the attempt to conceal Unbelief in figurative interpretation.

While this rendering of *zindīq* (and *zandaqa*) diverges from common renderings, there is nothing idiosyncratic in al-Ghazālī's use of the term. In fact, his use is consistent with what has been identified as the original Persian meaning of the word (and we might recall that al-Ghazālī was a Persian who even wrote scholarly works in the language<sup>117</sup>). According to J. Choksy, *zindīq* was the Arabicized version of *zandig*, which in Pahlavi meant 'one who distorts exegesis'.<sup>118</sup> S. Shaked notes that the term was largely applied to Manichaeans, 'because of their "twisted" exegesis of the Avesta (*Zand*)'.<sup>119</sup> In early Abbasid times, the term was applied to those who violated the strict monotheism of Islam and were suspected of Manichaean dualist tendencies, most particularly, belief in the doctrine of the duality of eternals.<sup>120</sup> This underlying connotation of duplicity is hinted at in Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal's use of the word in his *al-Radd 'alā al-zanādiqa wa al-jahmiya*. The Ḥanbalite Ibn

Qudāma (d. 620/1223) would later state explicitly that 'the meaning of *zandaqa* is to make an outward show of belief in the true religion while inwardly adhering to its contrary.'<sup>121</sup> He would add that 'this religious hypocrisy used to be referred to as *nifāq* in the days of the Apostle of God; but today it is called *zandaqa*.'<sup>122</sup> This would all be confirmed by Ibn Taymīya, who says that most of the *fuqahā'* use the term as a synonym for hypocrisy (*nifāq*), or making a show of Islam in order to conceal Unbelief.<sup>123</sup>

In concrete terms, the *zanādiqa* to whom al-Ghazālī refers are primarily the philosophers (*al-falāsifa*), i.e., the Muslim heirs to the Neoplatonic system such as Ibn Sīnā and his ilk. Again, al-Ghazālī's case against them is that they cast aspersions on the literal meaning of fundamental tenets, such as the resurrection of the body, sentient punishment in the Hereafter, and God's knowledge of particulars, without any logical proof to substantiate this. According to al-Ghazālī's Rule of Figurative Interpretation, this lack of logical proof rendered their move to non-literal interpretation inadmissible. Moreover, their persistence in proffering these non-literal interpretations in the absence of such proof was proof that they did not really believe in these tenets and were only feigning figurative interpretation to make a show of belief. Thus, the philosophers become al-Ghazālī's foil for demonstrating the limits of his system for accommodating theological diversity among the *fuqahā'* and the *mutakallimūn*. They fall just outside the boundaries of this system, just inside of which al-Ghazālī places the Mu'tazilites.

In *Fayṣal*, al-Ghazālī is surprisingly brief in his treatment of the actual arguments of the *falāsifa*.<sup>124</sup> He does not discuss any of their would-be proofs for rejecting the literal truth of the fundamentals. He merely states that the Qur'ān and Sunna are too repetitive and too explicit to accommodate a non-literal interpretation of these tenets. Moreover, he claims, the philosophers *admit* that they believe that the Prophet lied. They simply insist that, while the Prophet knowingly delivered doctrines he knew to be untrue, the fact that he did so in order to promote the putative common good, i.e., by giving people something to believe in, exonerates him from any blame. Thus,

unlike the case among the *fuqahā'* and the *mutakallimūn*, it is not al-Ghazālī who is reading *takdhīb* into the philosophers' doctrines. Rather, according to him, the philosophers are guilty of *takdhīb* by their own admission.

Al-Ghazālī actually speaks, however, of two levels of *zandaqa*, which I interpret as atheism and deism, respectively. Atheism, or what he terms *zandaqa muṭlaqa*, denies categorically that the universe has a Creator. Deism, or qualified *zandaqa*, on the other hand, acknowledges the existence of a Creator but denies those realities taught by the prophets such as resurrection, Paradise, and Hell.

Al-Ghazālī's inclusion of the deists among the *zanādiqa* underscores an important aspect of his campaign, namely that his definitions are rooted in the perspective of revealed religion, according to which precise or concrete information about God and the Unseen are contingent upon God's act of revelation through the medium of prophets. On this understanding, one cannot reject the messengers without rejecting the message itself; for the messengership of the messengers is part and parcel of the message. Now, one can believe in God or the Creator in general without accepting the messengers. But such belief would provide no basis for belief in such notions as Paradise and Hell (not to mention specific duties such as prayer or fasting). Yet, from the perspective of revealed religion, this is the whole point of the matter, and al-Ghazālī is quick to note that *kufr* is a *legal* designation that is *posited by scripture*, its chief implication being eternal damnation in Hell. In other words, al-Ghazālī's definition of *kufr* is both precise and restrictive. Accordingly, a person can believe in God in the ordinary sense but be an Unbeliever in legal/scriptural terms, just as one can commit theft or adultery in the ordinary sense but not in the legal/scriptural sense.<sup>125</sup> The *zanādiqa*-deists, according to al-Ghazālī, are Unbelievers not because they do not believe in God, but because they reject the truthfulness of the Prophet Muhammad.

It should be noted, however, that while al-Ghazālī repeatedly identifies the *zanādiqa* with the philosophers in general, his initial reference is to 'most of the philosophers'. Al-Ghazālī is

not opposed to philosophical activity in and of itself; in fact, his proposal to the jurists and theologians to construct an agreed-upon criterion for 'logical proof' would require of them a significant investment in philosophical activity, as his recommendation of *al-Qisṭās al-mustaqīm* and *Miḥakk al-naẓar* clearly indicates. Similarly, al-Ghazālī speaks openly on other occasions of 'falāsifa who believe generally in God and the last day'.<sup>126</sup> Among those believing philosophers he may have had in mind is Abū al-Ḥasan Muḥammad b. Yūsuf al-ʿĀmirī (d. 381/992), who, though virtually unknown in the West, is ranked by al-Shahrastānī alongside the giants Ibn Sīnā and al-Farābī<sup>127</sup> and whose *Kitāb al-i'lām bi manāqib al-islām*<sup>128</sup> clearly shows him to have satisfied al-Ghazālī's decisive criterion for Islam.

### 3. THE LIMITS OF REASON: THE CRITIQUE OF *KALĀM*

In his autobiographical work, *al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl* (believed to be third to last work he wrote<sup>129</sup>), al-Ghazālī recounts the travails of his quest to find religious certainty and fulfilment. The *curriculum vitae* he provides testifies to the confidence he had initially placed in the power of reason and to the assiduousness with which he had pursued the life of the mind. Having devoted most of his life to law and the rational sciences, however, al-Ghazālī concedes in *Munqidh* that he came to find true fulfilment in the alogism of the Sufis.<sup>130</sup> This waning confidence in the panacean power of reason had already been foreshadowed in *Fayṣal*, even as al-Ghazālī continued in that work to appeal to reason as the only means of avoiding intolerance and fanaticism.

This apparently contradictory assessment of the role and value of reason might appear at first blush to support the charge that al-Ghazālī held conflicting ideas which he was never able to reconcile. Closer examination, however, reveals that, as he approached the end of his life, al-Ghazālī was far less dubious about the power of reason *per se* than he was convinced of the

limits of its utility in the private versus the public domain. Al-Ghazālī had come to recognize that a person's knowledge or convictions were not the same as what he or she was able to 'prove' or explain. Reason, for its part, might play a role in vindicating or explicating convictions, but it was virtually irrelevant to their actual coming into existence. Reason might be able to tell us that if we value A we must also accept B, because A and B are inseparable; or it might tell us that we cannot have both A and B because the two are mutually exclusive; it may even teach us how to organize the realization of our goals over time, whereby we deprive ourselves now in order to reap more richly in the future. In the end, however, it was not the mind ('*aql*) but the heart (*qalb*) or self (*nafs*) that determined our convictions and moved us to action.<sup>131</sup> Ultimately, like post-Enlightenment philosophers from Hobbes to the present, al-Ghazālī embraced the view that reason was neither self-directing nor self-motivated, but could operate only in the interest of values or convictions already present, values or convictions which reason itself could never fully get behind and 'push' into place.<sup>132</sup>

On a personal level, however, the primary goal of religion is precisely to promote and sustain motives and convictions that engender a God-pleasing state of being and acting. While reason may be of limited relevance to this essentially private enterprise, it can be extremely useful as a referee in public exchanges, precisely because it is devoid of any values of its own. Reason can justify, defend, or apprehend convictions; it can even deconstruct or reconcile them in accordance with agreed-upon standards of acceptability. Moreover, since values are essentially irrelevant to its constitution, reason is, *ceteris paribus*, equally accessible to all. In the end, however, no matter how successful one might be in the public enterprise of justifying or defending one's stated positions, the settling of true religious conviction in one's heart is not a necessary consequence. Failure to appreciate this fact had plagued al-Ghazālī throughout his early life. He was now trying to pass on the benefits of this hard-earned realization to his youthful interlocutor in *Fayṣal*.



This is the real meaning behind al-Ghazālī's critique of *kalām* in *Fayṣal*. As early as the *Iḥyā'*, he had insisted that speculative rationalism was not the way to apprehending the truth nor to acquiring true religious convictions. According to him, the only real function of *kalām* was to defend the beliefs of the Muslims, particularly against rational attack by the enemies of Islam.<sup>133</sup> This same basic argument reappears in *Fayṣal*. Here, however, al-Ghazālī adds that, were he to put aside pretensions of political correctness, he would declare outright that *kalām* is a forbidden (*ḥarām*) science, with only two exceptions: 1) a thinker who develops doubts may use *kalām* to clear these up; 2) a scholar may learn *kalām* in order to treat those who develop doubts or to beat back the efforts of those who attack Islam.<sup>134</sup> Again, however, *kalām*'s usefulness in this essentially public capacity was not to be confused with any ability on its part to promote personal piety. Indeed, for all the learning and erudition they displayed, the sessions of theological disputation rarely, if ever, resulted in a conversion. On the contrary, al-Ghazālī insists, faith in God comes 'of a light that God casts into the hearts of His servants, as a gift and a gratuity from Him'. In fact, he adds,

true faith (*al-īmān al-rāsikh*) is the faith of the masses that develops in their hearts from childhood due to their constant exposure (to religious material), or that accrues to them after they have reached the age of majority as a result of experiences that they cannot fully articulate.

At bottom, al-Ghazālī's case against *kalām* was not simply that it did not lead to truth in terms of the actual content of its doctrines, but rather that *kalām*'s tendency was actually to impede the realization of truth. In other words, by holding up formal doctrine as a true and actual representation of God, *kalām* ended up veiling people from God Himself. As one writer put it (in another context), 'When the creeds are accepted as correct or orthodox almost immediately orthodox behaviour begins to demand assent to the creeds rather than "yes" to the God to



whom the creeds point...'.<sup>135</sup> Or, as another scholar summed it up, 'doctrines, however sophisticated they may be, are still veils...'.<sup>136</sup> For al-Ghazālī, the operative distinction in all of this was between information, on the one hand, and realization, on the other. Being informed has to do with receiving data, which can be communicated through words alone. Realization, on the other hand, accrues through experience. Its true medium is life, and while it typically 'changes' the meanings of the words used to impart information, it does so only in the sense of stripping them of their abstractness and elasticity. The difference between being informed and coming to a realization might be likened to the difference between hearing the words, 'I love you,' after one and after forty years of marriage. It is what W. Chittick refers to as the difference between 'hearing' the truth and 'seeing' it made manifest.<sup>137</sup> Now, al-Ghazālī fully subscribes to the idea that concrete information about God and the Unseen can only come through the medium of the prophets. As such, what the *mutakallimūn* extract from revelation *may* constitute valid data about God. But al-Ghazālī does not believe that imparting and receiving information is the sole or ultimate goal of religion, or that being informed is as far as human beings can or should go. Rather, the goal of religion is the realization of the truth behind the information; for only this can promote true religious motives and is the essence of true religious conviction. This is what al-Ghazālī refers to in *Fayṣal* as 'gnosis (*ma'rifa*),' and this is what Professor Frank had in mind when he spoke of al-Ghazālī's 'higher theology'.<sup>138</sup> Here al-Ghazālī's alogism finds its clearest expression in all of *Fayṣal*. And it is here that his atheological—or perhaps even anti-theological—leanings are most apparent.

[I]f a person is constant in worship to the point that he attains true God-consciousness (*taqwā*) and his soul is cleansed of the pollutants of this transient life and he achieves unfailing consistency in the remembrance of God, the light of gnosis (*ma'rifa*) will reveal itself to him such that matters that had been blindly accepted on faith become as if he sees and witnesses them (for himself). This is true

gnosis which obtains only after the fetters of formalized doctrine are undone and the bosom is expanded by the light of God the Exalted.

It should be noted that while al-Ghazālī speaks here only of 'religious experiences' in the sense of those that obtain as a result of concrete acts of worship, what he has in mind are actually the cumulative experiences of life in general. This is explicitly born out later in *Munqidh*, for example, where he speaks of the means via which one comes to realize the truth of the prophethood of Muhammad. There he states that this obtains not by simply observing or receiving reliable reports of the Prophet's miracles, but by repeatedly observing the truths taught by the Prophet manifest themselves in one's life. It is by experiencing, in other words, the truth of such Prophetic teachings as, 'Whoever acts on the basis of what they know, God will grant them knowledge of what they do not know,' or 'Whoever assists an evil-doer (*ẓālim*), God will (eventually) turn the latter against them,' that one comes to realize the truth of the Prophet's message.<sup>139</sup> Thus, al-Ghazālī advises,

this is the means by which you should seek certainty of (a claim to) prophethood, not by (a person's) turning a staff into a snake or splitting the moon. For when you observe the latter alone without the benefit of extraneous corroborative indicators too numerous to count, you may think that you are observing a feat of magic or a phantasm or that this is simply a test from God via which He intends to lead people astray. For, indeed, '*He leads astray whomsoever He wills and He guides whomsoever He wills.*'<sup>140</sup>

To be sure, this realization, or gnosis, is a thoroughly private affair that entails an inevitably subjective element; for no two people experience the same things under the same circumstances throughout their lives, nor does anyone outside the experience itself have direct access to it. There is thus a potential danger, particularly from the perspective of revealed religion, in recognizing the value and transformative power of experience. For, as far as revealed religion is concerned, experience is only

supposed to provide insights into the meaning and veracity of revelation, not to take the place of revelation by effectively becoming an independent source of information. As the Protestant theologian Paul Tillich says of experience, 'Its productive power is restricted to the transformation of what is given to it.'<sup>141</sup> Meanwhile, because those outside one's experience have no way of validating it, they have little justification for sanctioning the transformations, amplifications, or points of de-emphasis it may suggest. Thus, at the community level (or in modern parlance, at the level of organized religion) only those transformations that can be substantiated on the basis of reason—to which everyone has ostensibly equal access—will generally be recognized. For his part, al-Ghazālī is clearly aware of the liabilities connected with experience, as he is of the latent tension between the religious individual and the religious community. He makes no direct attempt in *Fayṣal*, however, to overcome these difficulties. Perhaps this was his way of signalling his belief that these were not difficulties that could be overcome. These were simply inevitable facts of life that, at best, could only be prudently managed.

#### 4. THE LIMITS OF EXPERIENCE AND THE BOUNDLESSNESS OF GOD'S MERCY

Having defined Unbelief as the act of deeming the Prophet to be a liar, and having underscored the limitations of reason in the process of coming to belief, towards the end of *Fayṣal* al-Ghazālī conducts an interesting discussion on the fate of those who have not been exposed to authentic information about the Prophet and/or whose experiences have not provided a basis upon which to confirm his claims. This discussion follows his treatment of the exclusivism of some of the *mutakallimūn* and is designed in part both to highlight and counter their extremism. Beyond that, however, al-Ghazālī's point seems to be that while experience, like reason, is limited, whatever experiential deficits one might suffer are compensated for by the boundlessness of God's mercy.

The discussion begins with the claim by a speculative theologian to the effect that it is not the *mutakallimūn* but the Prophet who has restricted the number of people who will enter Paradise. This is clearly supported by a number of hadith, e.g., 'My community will divide into seventy-odd sects, only one of which will be saved.' Al-Ghazālī responds with a number of counter-hadith and a series of rational proofs via which he argues that phrases like 'being saved' and 'contingent of Hell,' as appear in his interlocutor's hadith, are not meant in the absolute. 'Being saved' refers, rather, in the first instance, to those whose records are so pure that they enter Paradise without being questioned about their deeds; it does not preclude the possibility of entering Paradise after having spent a period of time in Hell. Similarly, 'contingent of Hell' is not restricted to those who dwell in the Hellfire forever, but can include anyone who enters Hell for a period, even if they subsequently exit it and enter Paradise. In other words, contrary to his interlocutor's predilection, such statements by the Prophet should not be read in a spirit of vindictiveness whereby they maximize the number of people who remain in Hell forever. Rather, according to al-Ghazālī, it is the rare exception that a person will abide forever in Hell. This, he argues, is a testament to the vast and all-encompassing nature of God's mercy.

This was all directed towards those who professed Islam. Al-Ghazālī goes on, however, to insist that God's mercy will encompass non-Muslims as well, including 'most of the Christians of Byzantium and the [non-Muslim] Turks of this age'. These people he divides into three categories: 1) those who never heard so much as the name Muhammad; 2) those who heard his name and had access to concrete and authentic information about his life and mission; 3) those who heard of him but received wrong, insufficient, or misleading information about his life and mission. According to al-Ghazālī, it is only those of the second category, who come into reliable and concrete information about Muhammad and, in a spirit of defiance, persist in rejecting his prophethood, who will dwell forever in the Hellfire. This is because only such people can be said to be

guilty of deeming the Prophet to be a liar. As for those of the first and third categories, these will be covered by God's all-encompassing mercy. For, ultimately, their non-acceptance of Muhammad's prophethood is free of defiance and attributable to circumstances beyond their control. In the end, besides the outright, defiant rejecters, the only other people who will dwell in Hell are those who fail or refuse to investigate the veracity of the Prophet's claims. Even here, however, those ultimately condemned will in all likelihood constitute a minority. For, according to al-Ghazālī,

those possessed of faith in God and the Last Day, whatever religious community they might belong to, cannot betray th[e] motivation (to investigate the claims of and about Muhammad) after coming into knowledge of these indications that were effected through miraculous means that defied the laws of nature. And should they, in all earnestness, take it upon themselves to investigate (this matter) and seek (the truth thereof) and then be overcome by death before being able to confirm this, they too shall be forgiven, by virtue of His all-encompassing mercy.

Thus, al-Ghazālī advises, one should think of God's mercy as being as vast and all-encompassing as it actually is and not try to measure it with the inadequate scales of formal reasoning. Indeed, just as those who are endowed with limited or inferior rational powers have no cause to despair of God's forgiveness and mercy, neither do those who fail to come into proper belief due to the inadequacies and limitations of their experience.

### C. CONCLUSION

In human society there is ultimately no more powerful a position than that of being just human. Not only is this the least contested and most proveable of claims, it carries with it the putative authority to speak for the commonality of humanity as a whole. At bottom, this is a claim that every universal theology tends, willy-nilly, to make. For this is the most expedient means of



overcoming the problem of being of limited relevance in both space and time.

It is, here however, that theology perpetrates its most subtle and enduring fiction: the human represented by the prototypical theologian is bound by neither space nor time; he is 'transcendent' and speaks from beyond the pale of human history. He harbours no biases, carries no past, and labours under no provisional, half-, or untrue premises. As such, his theological conclusions represent universal and eternal truth. And only those who are morally depraved, intellectually challenged, or simply averse to truth—in short, flawed in their humanity—can fail to recognize this fact. History, meanwhile, as the precarious and contingent in us all, is not acknowledged as playing any role in the process. Instead, it is treated like the Wizard of Oz, to whom we are told to pay no attention behind that half-drawn curtain. In the end, it is the very invisibility of the theologian's history that makes both him and his theology so powerful.

This claim to transcendence is, as we have seen, shared by both Traditionalism and Rationalism. This is the ultimate beginning and root cause of theological intolerance in Islam. The only remedy for the problem is to expose the historical situatedness of the theologians themselves. Once this is done, it becomes a short and easy step to the argument that different endowments of history yield different modalities and levels of perception, none of which are in and of themselves any more or less reflective of one's commitment to God and revelation. This is the basic diagnosis and remedy presented by *Fayṣal*.

*Fayṣal* does not set out to expose the historical situatedness of the theologians directly; it simply implies this through its detailed response to the inevitable conflict engendered by the failure to acknowledge that situatedness. This is the whole point behind al-Ghazālī's five levels of perception. As for his three fundamentals, they merely reflect what all the groups, including the Crypto-infidels, professed to believe in anyway. The same could be said, *ceteris paribus*, of those doctrines that were backed by consensus (*ijmā'*) or handed down via diffuse



congruence (*tawātur*). In effect, these doctrines, by dint of the unanimous recognition they enjoyed or the nature of the means via which they had been preserved, had proved themselves to be impervious to the specificities of any particular history. As such, they could be said in effect to be 'transcendent' of history. This, in the final analysis, is what qualifies these doctrines to form the basis of a criterion for separating Belief from Unbelief.

This was the essence and main objective of *Fayṣal*. The rest of the work is divided between al-Ghazālī's vindication of his solution and some of his insights into some of the problems connected with religion in society, especially the role of reason and the vexed relationship between the religious individual and the religious group. In the end, however, whatever influence *Fayṣal* may or may not have had in 6th/12th century Nishapur, perhaps a better measure of al-Ghazālī's genius is the amount of profit with which his work can still be read by men and women across the world in this, the 15th/21st century.

#### D. A NOTE ON THE TRANSLATION

I have relied on the 1961 Cairo edition of *Fayṣal* edited by Sulaymān Dunyā, the most thorough edition to date. Among the technical features of the translation, I note the following.

All translations of Qur'ānic passages are my own.

All persons cited in the text have been identified in the notes. The notes also contain additional commentary and clarification of certain points.

Where al-Ghazālī mentions a prophet, especially the Prophet Muhammad, he almost invariably attaches the panegyric, '*ṣalla Allāhu 'alayhi wa sallama* (God's blessings and salutations be upon him).' This proved too cumbersome to maintain throughout the translation, so I opted to use an asterisk to represent it. Also, the optative '*ta'ālā* (the Exalted),' is used following the mention of God. I tried to maintain this to the extent feasible, but where this proved not to be the case I simply eliminated it.

Given al-Ghazālī's less than stellar reputation as a scholar of hadith, I have attempted to authenticate every hadith he cites in the text. Here, however, a word of caution is in order. *Fayṣal* is not a work of hadith, and it should not be expected that al-Ghazālī felt any need to follow the meticulous method of citation established by the hadith-scholars. He was almost certainly recalling these hadith from memory, as he appears even to have embellished some; and he could probably assume that most of these reports were well-known in the community. He uses no chains, or *isnāds*, and he appears to resort to paraphrase on numerous occasions. All of this complicated my attempts to locate these hadith. I relied partly on my memory of where I had encountered some of them in the collections of al-Bukhārī, Muslim, and Abū Dā'ūd, and a few theological texts. I relied more heavily, however, on al-'Irāqī's *al-Mughnī 'an ḥaml al-asfār fī takhrīj mā fī al-ihyā' min al-akhbār*, and A.J. Wensinck's *al-Mu'jam al-mufahras li alfāz al-ḥadīth al-nabawī*. My aim in seeking to track down these hadith was simply to establish that al-Ghazālī was not pulling material out of thin air in order to bolster his arguments. As such, wherever I was able to find a hadith that matched his wording and or the basic gist of his argument, I stopped and looked no further. Similarly, if my initial finding was that a hadith had been classed as fabricated, I accepted this and did not pursue the scholarly discussions regarding the reliability of the hadith. This is an obvious defect, for which the only excuses I can offer are my limitations of time and scholarly expertise. I should add, however, that this defect is significantly offset by the fact that in almost every instance I was able to find material that corroborated al-Ghazālī's citation. Ultimately, though my efforts in this regard were far from exhaustive, they served the purposes I had in mind. Future investigations may add to or even correct some of my conclusions.

Finally, in translating *Fayṣal* I have tried to combine the interests of accuracy and accessibility. I have tried to avoid needlessly recondite language in order to appeal to a wider audience. At the same time, I have tried to be accurate in

conveying the meaning of the text, particularly with regard to technical terms and concepts. Beyond the issue of meaning, however, I have also tried to convey something of that quiet tone and majestic resonance that readers of al-Ghazālī in Arabic have come to know and appreciate. In the end, I can only hope, and this is my solemn wish, that in my attempt to combine these interests my pen did not get the better of me, and that I have compromised neither myself nor the great *Hujjat al-Islām* Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī.

## NOTES

1. See, e.g., *The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*, ed. J. Bowker, (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 970.
2. See, e.g., *An Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. V. F. F. (New York: Philosophical Library, Inc., 1945), 782.
3. See, A. J. Wensinck, *The Muslim Creed* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932), 1-2.
4. The term heresy derives from the Greek *hairesis*, i.e., choice, election, course of action. In its early Christian context it came to apply to views that contradicted the teachings and authority of the Church, thus acquiring the meaning of wrong choice or unauthorized choice. See, J.B. Henderson, *The Construction of Orthodoxy and Heresy: Neo-Confucian, Islamic, Jewish and Early Christian Patterns*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 16-17. Henderson's treatment of Islam is based entirely on secondary literature.
5. See, *Oxford Dictionary*, 423. On this distinction in Islam, see the views of al-Ghazālī and Ibn Taymīya below, p. 54.
6. See, e.g., A. Azmeh, 'Orthodoxy and Hanbalite Fideism,' *Arabica*, vol. 35, no. 3 (November 1988); 253-67, wherein it is stated that orthodoxy and heresy have more to do with authority than they do with substance. I am in general agreement with Azmeh, but only if by authority he means the ability to enlist assent or obedience on the belief that the authority figure has the right to be obeyed. There is a sense, however, in which Azmeh appears to use authority in the sense of the ability to force compliance (my understanding of power). With this I do not agree. For while there are instances in Muslim history where might sought to make right (as in the case of the infamous *Mihna* [Inquisition] or the promulgation of the Qādirī Creed associated with the 'Abbāsīd Caliph al-Qādir billāh), there are too many counter-examples to sustain this as the general trend. For example, Sunnis living under Fāṭimid rule

did not as a rule suffer officially sanctioned policies to force them to accept Fātimid Ismā'ilism as orthodox and Sunnism, along with Imāmī Shī'ism, as heterodox. Nor were Shī'ites living under Sunni rule officially forced, as a rule, to declare Sunnism as orthodox and their own Shī'ite view as heterodox. On the distinction maintained here between power and authority, *see*, the excellent article by G. Makdisi, 'Authority in the Islamic Community' in '*La notion d'autorité au moyen âge: Islam, Byzance, Occident*,' ed. D. Sourdél and J. Sourdél-Thomine (Paris: Universitaires de France, 1982), 117-26.

7. The Mu'tazilite theologian, al-Qādī 'Abd al-Jabbār (d. 415/1024), for example, writing nearly two centuries after the Mu'tazilite débâcle in the *Mihna*, composed an entire book, entitled *The Superiority of Mu'tazilism and the Classes of Mu'tazilites*, in which those who rejected figurative interpretations of such scriptural data as that indicating God's mounting the Throne (*al-istiwā* 'alā al-'arsh) or His 'coming' (*majī*... 'wa jā'a rabbuka') were excoriated as anthropomorphists who were 'worse than those who worshipped idols'. *See*, *Faḍl al-i'tizāl wa ṭabaqāt al-mu'tazila*, ed. Fu'ād Sayyid (Tūnis: al-Dār al-Tūnisiyya li al-Nashr, 1393/1974), 152.
8. On my use of deism, *see* below pp. 58-9.
9. For an explanation of *tawātur*, *see* my discussion below, pp. 47-8.
10. For the definition of religion I rely upon, *see* below, pp. 8-9.
11. For stark examples of both the tendency to abuse '*kufī*' and to write it out of the Muslim lexicon, *see*, F. Esack, *Qur'ān, Liberation and Pluralism: An Islamic Perspective of Interreligious Solidarity Against Oppression* (Oxford: Oneworld Press, 1997).
12. *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law*, transl. A. Hamori and R. Hamori (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 67.
13. *See*, e.g., F. Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'ān* (Minneapolis: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1980), 80-105.
14. This is not to claim, after the fashion of Goldziher and others, that the Prophet was not a lawgiver and had no legal authority. It is simply to point out the difference between laying down legal rules, on the one hand, and engaging in the systematic interpretation of the meaning, scope, and application of those rules, on the other. The US Congress, for example, is both a legal authority and a law-giving body, but one does not have to hold a law degree to be a member of Congress.
15. *See*, e.g., W. Kaufmann, *The Faith of a Heretic* (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1961), 142. Also, *see* *ibid*, 143: 'Theology moves no mountains; it rarely moves people; it is something most people put up with, something they do not take seriously, something good manners requires one to respect—and not to think about.'

16. On the different modern uses of the term religion, *see*, R.T. McCutcheon, 'The Category "Religion" in Recent Publications: A Critical Survey,' *Numen*, vol. 42, no. 3 (1995): 284-309.
17. *See*, e.g., *Patterns of Religion*, ed. R. Schmidt et al. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1999), 4-5. Meanwhile, the *Oxford Dictionary*, xv, states: 'The Latin *religio* refers to the fear of God or the gods, and (much later) to the ceremonies and rites addressed to the gods. But it does so through its reference also to the scrupulous and often over-anxious way in which rituals are conducted.' Greater attention to such basic definitions might serve to check the tendency among some to exaggerate the degree of licence taken in referring to Islam as a religion, preferring instead to speak of it as 'a way of life'. For definitions such as the one just cited suggest that the real issue is not religion versus life, but rather how broad or narrow the scope of rituals and obligations in a religion are. In some religions this scope may be narrow, while in others, like Islam (or Judaism), it may be extremely broad.
18. *Black Religion: The Negro and Christianity in the United States* (New York: University Press of America, 1984), 30ff. According to Washington, the five religions in America were Secularism, Judaism, Protestantism, Catholicism, and Black Religion. Writing in the 1960s (the first edition of *Black Religion* was published by Beacon Press in 1966), Islam had not yet come to constitute in Washington's view a bona fide American religion.
19. This was a criticism by Washington, not a mere observation. 'Black Theology,' which made its debut in the late 60s and early 70s (the leading figure being unquestionably James Cone, followed by J. Deotis Roberts) was supposed to answer Black Religion's need for a theology. On this point, *see*, *Black Theology*, ed. J. Cone and G. Wilmore, 2 vols. (New York: Orbis Press, 1993), 1: 453-4.
20. *See*, above, p. 3.
21. *See*, his critique of *kalām* below, pp. 59-64, especially where he speaks of theologians who hold *kalām* to be the only way to truth and those who have not mastered this science to be devoid of faith. *See also*, pp. 62-4 below, on the distinction between knowledge and realization of truth.
22. On this point, *see*, Wensinck, op.cit., 1-2 and 248ff.
23. In the early period, i.e., at least as late as al-Ṭabarī, who died in 310/922, the term *ta'wīl* was used as a synonym for *tafsīr*, i.e., simple exegesis. Later it would come to be used more exclusively to refer to figurative or metaphorical interpretation.
24. *See*, *Oxford Dictionary*, 329.



25. Abū Ja'far Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān 'an ta'wīl al-qur'ān* 2nd ed., 30 vols. (Cairo: Muḥammad Maḥmūd al-Ḥalabī, 1388/1968), 30: 184-8.
26. *Jāmi'*, 1: 192. At *Jāmi'*, 8: 205, in treating the first appearance of the phrase *istawā 'alā al-'arsh*, al-Ṭabarī indicates that it was a source of controversy and that he had explained its meaning in a previous discussion. The first time the verb *istawā* appears in the Qur'ān is at 2:29, from which I took the present material.
27. See, e.g., his *Uṣūl ahl al-sunna wa al-jamā'a* (also known as *Risālat ahl al-thaḡhr*) ed. M.S. al-Julaynd (Cairo: n.p., 1987) 73-5.
28. See, e.g., his *Kitāb al-tawḥīd*, ed. F. Kholeif (Beirut: Dar El-Machreq, 1986), 67-77.
29. See, e.g., his *al-Radd 'alā al-zanādiqa wa al-jahmiya* (Cairo: Dār al-Salafiya, 1399/1979).
30. See, e.g., his *al-Radd 'alā al-jahmiya*, ed. G. Vitesam (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1960), 13-29.
31. *al-Radd 'alā al-zanādiqa*, 50-1 (but see 48-53 for the entire explanation).
32. It is interesting that, over the entire course of this argument, Imām Aḥmad adduces not a single hadith! Also, at risk of stating the obvious, any Rationalist work would bear out my point about the distinction between theology and exegesis with equal if not more clarity than does Imām Aḥmad's *Radd*.
33. Interestingly, none other than al-Ghazālī himself would attempt to refute (or disguise) this fact in his *al-Qistās al-mustaḡim*, where he tried to show that Aristotelian logic had been used in and prescribed by the Qur'ān.
34. See, e.g., M. Fakhry, *A History of Islamic Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970); M.M. Sharif, *A History of Muslim Philosophy* (Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz Press, 1963-6); W.M. Watt, *The Formative Period of Islamic Thought* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1973); M. Cook, *Early Muslim Dogma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); G. Hourani, 'Islamic and non-Islamic Origins of Mu'tazilite Ethical Rationalism,' *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 7 (1976): 59-87.
35. W.M. Watt, *Islamic Philosophy and Theology* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1985), 37. This is a revised and expanded edition of the same work published in 1962. Elsewhere Watt points out, incidentally, that this insistence on self-sufficiency in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary was also characteristic of medieval and early modern Christianity, which downplayed its debt to Islam and exaggerated its dependence on ancient Greece and Rome. See, his *The Influence of Islam on Medieval Europe* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1972), 84.



36. *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period: An Essay in Quantitative History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979).
37. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), vii-xiii.
38. 'Islam,' *Late Antiquity*, 219. Emphasis added.
39. Watt, *Islamic Philosophy*, 37.
40. Proponents of Traditionalism might argue, of course, that the Arab nativist tradition of 7th century (CE) Arabia, in its capacity as the ideational backdrop against which revelation acquired whatever meaning it came to have to the Prophet and his Companions, was part of what W. Graham refers to as the 'revelatory event,' of which the Qur'ān was the main but not the only constituent. In other words, God's act of choosing this backdrop as the context in which to reveal His will effectively confers upon it the status of 'revelation' (small 'r,' in contrast to capital 'R,' i.e., Revelation, including the Qur'ān and, by extension, the Sunna). In considering this claim, however, see my discussion on tradition and Traditionalism below, pp. 24-9. On Graham's concept of the revelatory event, see, his *Divine Word and Prophetic Word in Early Islam* (The Hague: Mouton Publishers, 1977), 9-13.
41. See, especially, his discussion below at pp. 49-55.
42. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), vii.
43. *Ibid.*, ix.
44. *Ibid.*, ix. One wonders where this leaves the Ash'arites and Māturīdites. Unless one buys into the Traditionalist attempt to exclude them, they should certainly be included among the *ahl al-sunna wa al-jamā'a*. Of course, Ash'arites and Māturīdites were also known to exclude Traditionalists. But this is precisely the problem: the history of Muslim theology cannot be seen clearly through the ideological lens of either group. See below pp. 16-29.
45. *Ibid.*, ix-x. At p. ix, Abrahamov notes that he is not entirely comfortable with the term 'Rationalism,' but on p. 32 he says that, 'since there are ingredients of rationalism in Islamic theology, I prefer to use the term.'
46. *Ibid.*, x.
47. *Ibid.*, x.
48. *Ibid.*, x. See below, pp. 102-3, however, where al-Ghazālī affirms that the Mu'tazilites are indeed more rationalistic than the Ash'arites, but for reasons different from those given by Abrahamov.
49. Abrahamov speaks of 'pure traditionalists who do not use reason,' but fails to identify this category with any particular individuals or groups. Also, the Ash'arites seem to play a dual role, now Rationalists when compared to Traditionalists, now Traditionalists when compared to Mu'tazilites.
50. This expanded use of 'revelation' draws on W. Graham's theory of the Prophet's standing at the centre of a 'revelatory event'. See above, n. 40. The inclusion of hadith in this construct assumes, of course, their

sound attribution to the Prophet. On the distinction implied here between hadith and Sunna, see, Y. Dutton, *The Origins of Islamic Law: The Qur'ān, the Muwaṭṭa' and Madinan 'Amal* (Surrey: Curzon Press, 1999), 168-77.

51. Throughout this introduction I use the phrase 'Aristotelian-Neoplatonic tradition'. It should be noted, however, that in doing so I am not claiming that Muslim rationalists, specifically the *mutakallimūn*, drew upon such Neoplatonic staples as emanationism or the Agent Intellect in the same way that the Muslim *falāsifa* did. My point is simply that certain Neoplatonic assumptions and polarities informed the thought of the *mutakallimūn*. For example, the attribution of a body to God was not only inadmissible because it constituted anthropomorphism (i.e., accidents inhering in the divine); it was also rejected because it entailed the attribution of evil to God. As H. Chadwick notes in his essay on the Neoplatonic legacy in Late Antiquity, 'Plotinus had no hesitation labeling the body as an evil on the ground of its materiality.' See, his 'Philosophical Tradition and the Self,' *Late Antiquity*, 63. Similarly, the notion that God could not be mounted on the Throne or located in any direction seems also to reflect a Neoplatonic bias. As Chadwick notes, Neoplatonists held that 'God is everywhere because he is nowhere.' *Ibid.*, 67. My point, then, in associating the *mutakallimūn* with Neoplatonism is merely that the latter appears to have bequeathed certain biases to the former, even as the former would reject such basic notions as emanationism. Indeed, among the manifest characteristics of the early translations of Greek works into Arabic, scholars have noted 'a tendency towards interpretation with a markedly Neoplotonic preference'. See D. Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 146.
52. See, e.g., Aḥmad b. Yaḥyā Ibn al-Murtaḍā, *Ṭabaqāt al-mu'tazila*, ed. S. D. Wilzer (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Publishers, 1961), 7 (but see the entire discussion from 5-7), where the pedigree of Wāṣil b. 'Aṭā' and 'Amr b. 'Ubayd, the reputed founders of Mu'tazilism, are traced back to the Prophet through 'Abd Allāh b. Muḥammad b. al-Ḥanafīya and his father, Muḥammad b. al-Ḥanafīya through 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib.
53. As A. Knysh perceptively points out: 'Seen within the broader historical context, the Mu'tazilites, who had inherited the methods of speculation, harbouring back to the Greek and Christian patterns, also had a good claim to be called "traditionalists".' See, his 'Orthodoxy and Heresy in Medieval Islam: An Essay in Reassessment,' *The Muslim World*, no. 83, vol. 1 (1993): 55.
54. At one point, for example, in a colourful display of his contempt for Rationalists who reject isolated (*aḥādī*) hadith on the argument that they do not yield certainty, and then adduce in their place rational arguments that are also far from certain, the Ḥanbalite Ibn Qudāma exclaims: 'Their case is like a blind man urinating on a roof, facing the

- people with his pudendum, and supposing that no one sees him, since he himself is incapable of seeing his own person.' See, G. Makdisi (transl.), *Ibn Qudāma's Censure of Speculative Theology* (London: Luzac and Company Ltd., 1962), 33.
55. This is well-known in the case of Traditionalism (see, e.g., Azmeh, *ibid.*). But even as late as the 5th/11th century, the Mu'tazilite 'Abd al-Jabbār could insist on the obligation to rely on one's *fiṭra*, or primordial nature. At one point, for instance, clearly annoyed at a Traditionalist interpretation of a hadith, he states defiantly, 'It is not permissible for a person to abandon what God has naturally ingrained (*rakkaba*) in his intellect on the basis of this hadith'. See, *Faḍl al-i'tizāl*, 148; see also, *ibid.*, 189ff.
  56. *Islamic Theology*, x. This is a common depiction among scholars of Muslim theology and is by no means limited to Prof. Abrahamov. I have simply relied on him for the clarity and straightforwardness with which he expresses this point of view.
  57. *Tashbīh*, literally 'to liken,' is to liken God to created entities. Other terms commonly found in the literature, e.g., *tamthīl* (lit., 'to draw similarity') and *takyīf* ('to posit modality') are similar in their technical meaning to *tashbīh*. *Tajsim*, on the other hand, literally, 'to corporealize,' is to attribute corporeality or a physical body to God. All of these forms of 'anthropomorphism' share in the act of attributing accidents (*a'rād/s. 'arad*) to God.
  58. On the continued obsession with being as the 'ultimate concern' of theology, see, P. Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 2 vols. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1966), 1:20ff.
  59. T. Izutsu, *Creation and the Timeless Order of Things* (Ashland, Oregon: White Cloud Press, 1998), 3-4.
  60. The most concise and useful presentation on this particular issue appears in Hartshorne's *Insights and Oversights of Great Thinkers* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1983), 40-56, esp. 43ff. Another important and relevant work of his is *Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984). For a reaction to Hartshorne by numerous philosophers, see, L.E. Hahn, ed., *The Philosophy of Charles Hartshorne* (La Salle, IL: Open Court Press, 1991).
  61. Pace Abrahamov, *Islamic Theology*, 81 (n. 37): 'Anthropomorphism (*tashbīh*) means likening God to man.' Abrahamov is of course technically correct ('anthropomorphism' being from the Greek *anthropos*, human, and *morphe*, form). But the concept as such is underinclusive in the context of Muslim theology. For *tashbīh*, *takyīf*, *tamthīl*, and even *tajsim* covered not only human likenesses to God but all created likenesses to God, God being distinguished from created entities by the fact that the latter are possessed of accidents.

62. *Insights*, 50-1.
63. To take just one random example, the last part of a lengthy hadith in al-Bukhārī, 9: 796-98 (*Kitāb al-tawhīd*) reads: '...then he continues to petition (God) until God laughs at him; and when God reaches the point of laughing at him He says to him, "enter Paradise".'
64. E.g., the idea that God is the creator of processes of becoming rather than states of being renders problematic (or at least changes the meaning of) the notion of God's complete control over reality. Similarly, the idea that created entities carry in themselves an element of choice in their own coming to completion complicates the notion of unilateral divine intervention. Indeed, on such an understanding, basic concepts like prayer and miracles would have to be radically reinterpreted. On these and related critiques of Process Theology, see, D. Basinger, *Divine Power in Process Theism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 5ff.
65. It should not be understood by this that Traditionalists are limited to the Ḥanbalite school; the Shāfi'ī, Ḥanafī, and Mālikī schools all have Traditionalist wings. The Ḥanbalite school is distinguished, however, by the fact that it was exclusively Traditionalist in theology. It is the only Sunni school that holds this distinction. See, e.g., G. Makdisi, 'Hanbalite Islam,' 239.
66. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).
67. *Tradition*, 219.
68. *Ibid.*, 219.
69. *Ibid.*, 221.
70. *Ibid.*, 221.
71. *al-Umm*, 8 vols., ed. Muḥammad Zuhri al-Najjār (Cairo: Maktabat Kulliyāt al-Azhar, 1381/1961), 7: 191-4.
72. *al-Risāla*, ed. Aḥmad Muḥammad Shākir (Cairo: Dār al-Turāth, 1979), 533ff. For an example of an early Mālikī response to such charges, see, my 'Setting the Record Straight: Ibn al-Labbād's Refutation of al-Shāfi'ī,' *Journal of Islamic Studies* 11: 2 (2000): 121-46.
73. Abū Ja'far Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh al-ṭabarī*, ed. Muḥammad Abū al-Faḍl Ibrāhīm, 9 vols. (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, n.d.), 8: 639. A more contemporary example of this 'processing' appears in the work of ■ leading authority in the Salafī movement, the late Muḥammad Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī, *Talkhīṣ ṣifāt ṣalāt al-nabī* (British Columbia: Majlis of al-Haqq Publications, n.d.), 29. In describing the *tashahhud* (supplication made in the sitting position at the end of the second and final units of prayer), al-Albānī notes that after the death of the Prophet one should say, 'Peace unto the Prophet (*as-salāmu 'ala 'n-nabī*)' instead of, 'Peace be unto you, O Prophet (*as-salāmu 'alayka ayyuhā 'n-nabī*)', as explicitly handed down in hadith. Al-Albānī appears to be motivated here by a desire to avoid implicating the Prophet

in the practice of calling upon dead saints (known as *tawassul* and or *istighātha*) as practiced by some Sufis. He cites in support of his view the practice of the Companions Ibn Mas'ūd, 'Ā'isha, Ibn al-Zubayr, and Ibn 'Abbās. This, however, i.e., the fact that these Companions 'processed' what was handed down, actually adds to rather than detracts from my point.

74. L. Gardet and M.M. Anawati, e.g., in their *Introduction à la Théologie Musulmane: Essai de Théologie Comparée* (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1948) seem to give the impression that theology is synonymous with *kalām*.
75. Abrahamov, op.cit., vii.
76. This, incidentally, is a major source of the seemingly natural attraction between African-American Muslims and the theological outlook of Traditionalism (now in the form of Salafism), even when they are repelled or confused by the social or political ideology of the latter. In the words of J.D. Roberts, 'The Platonic-Aristotelian logical and metaphysical tradition is alien to th[e] Black religious tradition.' See, his 'A Creative Response to Racism: Black Theology,' *The Church and Racism*, ed. G. Baum and J. Coleman (New York: Seabury Press, 1982), 41. Similarly, the increasing estrangement of the modern mind from the intellectual schemas of the Aristotelian-Neoplatonic tradition—with no comparable, agreed-upon replacement—goes a long way (along with massive increases in literacy and the availability of books) in explaining the increasing popularity of 'fundamentalist' interpretations in both Christianity and Islam.
77. *Philosophy and Theology*, 19. See also, *idem*, *The Formative Period of Islamic Thought* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1973), 5-6. A similar view is also expressed by Makdisi and Goldziher. See, 'Hanbalite Islam,' 251.
78. See above, note 6.
79. The example of university professors is demonstrative of what I have in mind by formal versus informal authority. As far as formal authority is concerned, all of them are vested with Ph.D degrees. Yet, despite this formal equality, the opinions of some are more influential than those of others, though there is no formal title corresponding to this marginal advantage.
80. *al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl wa al-muwaṣṣil ilā dhī al-'izza wa al-jalāl*, ed. J. Ṣalībā and K. 'Iyāḍ (Beirut: Dār al-Andalus, n.d), 114.
81. As, for example, with the Edict in support of Mu'tazilism by the Caliph al-Ma'mūn (regency: 198/218) or the Edict in support of Traditionalism in the name of the Caliph al-Qādir in the 5th/11th century. See, G. Makdisi, *Ibn 'Aqil*, 8ff.
82. On this point, see, G. Makdisi, *The Rise of Colleges* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1981), 106.



83. *Munqidh*, 134.
84. *Ibid.*, 159.
85. See, R. Frank, *Al-Ghazālī and the Ash'arite School* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 100.
86. This work has been translated by D. Margoliouth under the title, *The Devil's Delusions*. Publication details unavailable.
87. (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Kutub al-Thaqāfiya, 1407/1986).
88. *Ihyā'*, 1: 58.
89. *Rise*, 133, but see the whole section on 'Munazara-Disputation,' 128-46. On the use of *ad hominem* diatribes, Makdisi writes: 'It happened often in a disputation that a disputant, unable to subdue his opponent, resorted to ridicule or downright insolence.' *Ibid.*, 135.
90. *Ihyā'*, 1: 22.
91. I. A. Bello, *The Medieval Islamic Controversy Between Philosophy and Orthodoxy* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1989), 9-10. Bello thus focuses almost exclusively on the relationship between Fayṣal and al-Ghazālī's polemic against the Muslim Neoplatonic philosophers, *Tahāfut al-falāsifa* (*The Incoherence of the Philosophers*).
92. 'Al-Ghazālī,' *EI*2, 2: 1040.
93. *Ash'arite School*, 78. At *ibid.*, 88, Professor Frank notes that al-Ghazālī's aim overall, i.e., not in *Fayṣal* specifically, was to present a 'global theological vision that in its higher metaphysics and ethics embraces all the sciences, disciplines and practices proper to or recognized by Islam—all levels of Muslim experience, knowledge, belief and activity—within an integrated whole'. This to my mind is more consistent with al-Ghazālī's aim in *Fayṣal*.
94. Professor Frank's interpretation appears at times to be overly informed by his view that al-Ghazālī was 'intellectually pompous' (*Ash'arite School*, x). It is difficult to gauge the meaning of such a charge when virtually everybody in medieval society wrote with self-assuredness. Moreover, while the *Ihyā'* contains language that is suggestive of a certain elitism, there are also egalitarian sentiments indicating that truth is open to everybody. For example, at *Ihyā'*, 3: 14, after discussing the reasons people fail to apprehend the truth, al-Ghazālī says: 'These, then, are the reasons that prevent hearts from knowing the reality of things. Otherwise, every heart is by nature capable of apprehending reality; for this is a noble, divine affair (*amr rabbānī sharīf*) on the basis of which humans differ from the rest of creation...'. Emphasis mine.
95. Even as partisan an Ash'arite as Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī would admit that Ash'arism is more of a method and orientation than a body of doctrine. He points out that many Ash'arites, e.g., al-Ghazālī's teacher, al-Juwaynī, and al-Ghazālī, diverged on individual points of doctrine while remaining Ash'arites. See, his *Ṭabaqāt al-shāfi'īya*, 10 vols., ed.

- A.M. Hulw and M.M. Ṭanāhī (Cairo: 'Īsā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1384/1965), 6: 244ff. Professor Frank appears, however, to take at face value the fanatical views of al-Baghdādī (see below), according to whom Ash'arism was a much narrower construct. Al-Baghdādī, incidentally, appears to have exerted an enormous impact on the study of Muslim theology from behind the scenes, laying the groundwork for a theological essentialism that became the basis for critical judgements about individual theologians and theological schools.
96. *Ash'arite School*, 21-2.
  97. The quote is from Goldziher's '*Vorlesungen über den Islam*' (Heidelberg, 1910), cited in G. Makdisi, 'Hanbalite Islam,' *Studies on Islam*, trans. and ed. M. Swartz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 252 (Swartz's translation).
  98. On the meaning of material heresy, see, above, p. 3.
  99. *Uṣūl al-dīn*, 3rd ed. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiya, 1401/1981), 335. This is a reprint of the 1928 Istanbul edition.
  100. *Ibid.*, 234.
  101. *Ibid.*, 267.
  102. *Faḍl al-i'tizāl*, 152.
  103. *Uṣūl al-dīn*, 251.
  104. *Ibid.*, 254.
  105. *Ibid.*, 195.
  106. *Ibid.*, 67.
  107. See, G. Makdisi, 'Ash'ari and the Ash'arites in Islamic Religious History II,' *Studia Islamica* 18 (1963): 37ff.
  108. Ed. 'A. Badawī (Cairo: al-Dār al-Qawmiya li al-Ṭibā'a wa al-Nashr, 1383/1964). See, p. d (*dāl*) of Badawī's introduction, where he states that al-Baghdādī was al-Ghazālī's source for his information on the Bāṭinites.
  109. In fact, there is clear evidence (*al-Iqtisād fī al-i'tiqād* [Cairo: Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī and Sons, n.d.], 120) that he had already begun to think about the issue of *takfīr* (deeming a person to be an Unbeliever) while he was still in Baghdad.
  110. Makdisi, *Ibn 'Aqīl*, 9 (but see, 9-11).
  111. Cf. Kaufmann, speaking in a Judaeo-Christian context: 'It is, no doubt, exceedingly difficult to be fair, but theology is founded on a comprehensive, rigorous and systematic refusal to as much as attempt to be fair. It does not merely occasionally lapse into acceptance of a double standard: theology is based on a devout commitment to a double standard.' *Faith*, 118.
  112. He notes, however, that *tawātur* can yield different levels of certainty, depending on its object. Thus, while both the existence of Mecca and that of the prophet Ilyās have been reported via *tawātur*, one finds

- oneself more certain of the existence of Mecca than one does of the existence of Ilyās. *See, Ihyā'*, 1: 73.
113. The position of al-Nazzām is reported by al-Ghazālī himself. On Ibn Ḥazm's position, *see*, his *al-Ihkām fī uṣūl al-aḥkām*, 8 vols., ed. A. M. Shākīr (Beirut: Dār al-Āfāq al-Jadīda, 1403/1983), 4: 147-51.
  114. In the interest of clarity, I use my own example rather than the more distant examples given by al-Ghazālī.
  115. *See*, the discussion above on Traditionalism.
  116. *Majmū' fatāwā ibn taymiya*, 37 vols., ed. 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. Muḥammad Qāsim al-'Āsimī al-Najdī al-Ḥanbalī (Beirut: Dār al-'Arabīya, 1398/1977), 7: 472. *See also*, his definitive statement on primary versus secondary doctrines in *Muwāfaqat ṣaḥīḥ al-manqūl li ṣaḥīḥ al-ma'qūl*, 2 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiya, 1405/1985), 1:87.
  117. E.g., *Alchemy of Happiness, Refutation of the Permissivists, and Advice to Rulers*. *See*, G. Hourani, 'A Revised Chronology of Ghazālī's Writings,' *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 104.2 (1984): 300-1.
  118. *See*, his entry 'Mazdaksim,' *Late Antiquity*, 570.
  119. Quoted in R. Lim, 'Christian Triumph and Controversy,' *Late Antiquity*, 218.
  120. M. Ibrahim, 'Religious Inquisition as Social Policy: The Persecution of the *Zanadiqa* in the Early Abbasid Caliphate,' *Arab Studies Quarterly*, vol. 16, no. 2 (Spring, 1994): 54-5. One wonders what light this might shed on the early development of the Mu'tazilites as a movement *against* heresy as opposed to lukewarm, duplicitous promoters thereof.
  121. Makdisi, *Censure*, 5.
  122. *Ibid.*, 5. Note, incidentally, that Ibn Qudāma's testimony demonstrates that Traditionalists not only processed, selectively endorsed, and added to what was handed down, but that on some level they were both aware and accepting of this.
  123. *See*, *Majmū' fatāwā*, 7: 741, 7: 471-2, 12: 352. (*Fuqahā'*/s. *faqīh*, are the authoritative doctors of the law along with their protégés at the advanced stage of their legal education.)
  124. For al-Ghazālī's detailed argument against the philosophers, *see*, M. Marmura's *The Incoherence of the Philosophers* (a translation of al-Ghazālī's *Tahāfut al-falāsifa*) (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1997).
  125. In Islamic law, an unmarried person can only commit fornication, not adultery, even if his/her partner in the offence is married. Similarly, most acts of pilferage fall short of the legal definition of theft (*sariqa*).
  126. *See*, Frank, *Ash'arite School*, 93.
  127. *al-Milal wa al-nihāl*, 2 vols., ed. A. Muḥannā and A. Fā'ūr (Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rifa, 1417/1997), 2: 490.
  128. Ed. A.A. Ghurāb (Cairo: Dār al-Kitāb al-'Arabī, 1387/1967). *See*, e.g., p. 136, where he speaks of the sentient pleasures of the Hereafter.

129. See, Hourani, 'Revised Chronology,' 301-2.
130. *Munqidh*, 77-8. See my comments above, however, on al-Ghazālī's 'sober Sufism'.
131. For more on this issue, see, my 'The Alchemy of Domination? Some Ash'arite Responses to Mu'tazilite Ethics,' *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 31, (1999): 185-201.
132. As late as *al-Mustasfā*, which was written after both *Fayṣal* and *Munqidh*, al-Ghazālī would write: 'Reason knows the way to safety, while human instinct (*al-ṭab'*) urges one to travel that route. For the love of self and disdain of pain is ingrained in every human. Thus, you have erred in stating that reason (*al-'aql*) is a motivator (*dā'in*). Nay, reason is only a guide (*hādīn*), while impulses and motives (*al-bawā'ith wa al-dawā'ī*) issue from the self (*al-naḥs*), based on information provided by reason.' See, *al-Mustasfā min 'ilm uṣūl al-fiqh*, 2 vols. (Cairo: al-Āmiriyya Press, 1322/1904), 1: 61.
133. *Ihyā'*, 1:97.
134. Cf. G. Makdisi, 'Al-Ghazālī, disciple d'al-Shāfi'ī en droit et en théologie,' in *Ghazālī, la raison et le miracle* (Paris: Editions Maisonneuve et Larose, 1987), 45-55.
135. C.F. Allison, *The Cruelty of Heresy: An Affirmation of Christian Orthodoxy* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1994), 20.
136. See, H. Landholt, 'Ghazālī and Religionswissenschaft,' in *Asiatische Studien/Études Asiatiques*, vol. 45, no. 1 (1991): 46.
137. See, his foreword to *The Niche of Lights*, trans. D. Buchman (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1998), xii.
138. However, al-Ghazālī's actual characterization of this gnosis in *Fayṣal* renders Professor Frank's description of it as a 'higher theology' problematic. See, below, p. 124.
139. *Munqidh*, 149.
140. Ibid.
141. *Systematic Theology*, 1: 46.



Annotated Translation of  
*Fayṣal al-Tafriqa Bayna al-Islām  
wa al-Zandaqa*

The Decisive Criterion for  
Distinguishing Islam from  
Masked Infidelity

*Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad b. Muḥammad  
b. Muḥammad al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111)*







In the name of God, the All-Merciful, the Mercy-Bestowing

I

Said the noble Imām and scholar, Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad b. Muḥammad b. Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, may God show him mercy: I praise God the Exalted, as a gesture of surrender to His might and a means of obtaining the optimum of His bounty, seeking thereby to avail myself of the success, aid, and (efficacy of) obedience that only He can grant, and to forestall (the travesty of) being forsaken by Him and of disobeying Him, that I might bring upon myself His ever-flowing bounty. And I send prayers upon His servant and messenger, Muhammad, the best of His creation, in open recognition of his prophethood, in hopes of acquiring the benefit of his intercession, surrendering to him his right (as prophet) upon me, seeking refuge in the felicitous rays of his innermost being and (the purity of) his soul. I send prayers, as well, upon his family, his Companions, and his descendants all.

To proceed: I see, my dear brother and partisan friend, that when a party of the envious assaulted your ears with criticisms against some of the books we wrote concerning the secrets of how religion works, along with their claim that these works contain views that go against the doctrine of our predecessors and the masters among the speculative theologians (*mashāyikh al-mutakallimīn*), and that digressing from the Ash‘arite school of theology, even so much as a hand’s length, is an act of Unbelief (*kufṛ*), and that parting with this school, even in the finest of details, is misguidance and ruin, your soul became agitated with bitter feelings, and your thoughts became disjointed and frayed. But I bid you, my dear, partisan friend, to be easy

on yourself and not to become perturbed. Tame your emotions a bit, be patient with what they say, and part with them with due civility. Think little of those who are not envied and vilified. And think the same of those who are not branded as misguided and accused of Unbelief. For what more perfect and reasonable advocate could there have been than the Master of Messengers\*? Yet, they said of him that he was no more than a common madman.<sup>1</sup> And what speech could be more glorious and true than that of the Lord of All Being? Yet, they said about it: 'It is but tales of the ancients.'<sup>2</sup> So beware of becoming preoccupied with arguing with these people, or with entertaining hopes of silencing them. For to do so is to hope for the impossible, indeed, like speaking to the deaf. Have you not heard the saying,

'The resolution of all conflict may be hoped for  
Save a conflict with one who opposes you out of envy'?

Indeed, were such a hope to be entertained by anyone, verses foretelling the futility (of inviting certain persons to the truth) would not have been revealed to the best of people. Yet, have you not heard the Exalted's statement:

And if their turning away weighs heavily upon you, then seek, if you are able, a tunnel in the ground or a ladder to the heavens in order to bring a (clear) sign to them (as if that would do any good). Nay, had it been God's will He would have gathered them all upon (true) guidance. So do not be among those who are ignorant. (XI:35)

And the Exalted's statement:

And were We to open up for them a door to the heavens through which they continued to ascend (ever higher), they would say, 'Our eyes have simply been afflicted with some malady; nay, we are a people bewitched'. (XV: 14-15)

And the Exalted's statement:

And had We sent down to you a book on parchments such that they could touch it with their very hands, those who reject the truth would have simply said, 'This is but manifest magic'. (VI: 7)

And the Exalted's statement:

And, had it come to pass that We sent down angels to them and the dead spoke to them (directly) and We gathered before them every reality so that they could see it face to face, they would (still) not acknowledge the truth, unless God so willed. But most of them are ignorant. (VI: III)

## II

Now, know that the reality and true definition of what constitutes Unbelief (*kufr*) and what constitutes faith (*īmān*) does not manifest itself to those whose hearts have been polluted by the pursuit of reputation and the piling up of wealth; nor does the true definition and inner secret of truth (*ḥaqq*) or misguidance (*ḍalāl*). On the contrary, these things are revealed only to those whose hearts have been cleansed of the impurities and pollutants of this transient life, then refined through perfected spiritual exercises and enlightened through pure remembrance of God, then nourished by right thinking and embellished with adherence to the religious law, then drenched in the light that arcs from the niche of prophethood, at which time their hearts become as if they were immaculate mirrors, the oil-lamp of faith (*īmān*) that rests in the enclosed glass around them becoming a source of light, its oil virtually glowing though fire touches it not.<sup>3</sup>

How could the hidden truths of the immaterial world (*malakūt*<sup>4</sup>) manifest themselves to a people whose god (*ilāh*) is their undisciplined passions (*hawā*), whose object of worship (*ma'būd*) is their leaders, whose direction of prayer (*qibla*) is the *dinār*, whose religious law is their own frivolity, whose will (*irāda*) is the promotion of reputation and carnal pleasures, whose worship (*ibāda*) is the service they render the rich among

them, whose remembrance (of God) is the devilish whisperings of their souls, whose most cherished possession is their (relationship with their) political leaders, and whose every thought is preoccupied with extracting legal dodges (*hiyal*/ sg. *hīla*) to accommodate the dictates of their (would-be) sense of shame?

For such a people, how is the darkness of Unbelief to distinguish itself from the light of faith? By some divine inspiration (*ilhām*)? But they have not emptied their hearts of the dregs of this transient life such that they would be in a position to receive such inspiration. By perfecting the (religious) sciences? But all they possess of the religious sciences is knowledge of such things as the rules of ritual purity and whether or not water distilled from saffron can be used for ritual purification. How preposterous (to expect such knowledge to come to such people)! Nay, this quest is too precious and too dear to be realized through sheer wishful thinking or leisurely pursuit. Therefore, busy yourself with your own affair, and do not waste what remains of your time on them.

So turn away from him who has turned away from Our reminder and desired nothing more than (the pleasures of) this transient life. Such is the limit of their knowledge. But, verily, your Lord is most knowledgeable of those who have strayed from His path, as He is most knowledgeable of those who are guided. (LIII: 29–30)

### III

As for you yourself, if your aim is to extract this rancour from your heart and from the hearts of those like you who are not seduced by the provocations of the envious and not afflicted by that blindness that condemns people to being led around by others (*taqlīd*), but who instead thirst for insight into some of the agonizings that result from the obscurities engendered by systematic thinking and stirred up by speculative inquiry, then address yourself and your companion and ask him for a definition of 'Unbelief'. If he claims that the definition of 'Unbelief' is that which contradicts the Ash'arite school, or the



Mu'tazilite school, or the Ḥanbalite school, or any other school, then know that he is a gullible, dim-witted fellow who is stifled by his enslavement to blind following. In fact, he is blinder than the blind. So do not waste your time trying to reform him. For it would be enough to silence him that you compare his claim with those of his opponents, since he will not find any difference between him and the rest of those who blindly follow some other school in opposition to him.

And it may be that, of all the schools, his patron (whom he follows) is inclined toward the Ash'arite school, holding that to go against this school, even in the finest of details, is an incontrovertible act of Unbelief. Ask him, though, how he came to enjoy this monopoly over the truth, such that he could adjudge (the likes of) al-Bāqillānī<sup>5</sup> to be an Unbeliever (*kāfir*) because the latter goes against him on the question of God's possessing the attribute of eternity, holding that this attribute is indistinct from the essence of God. Why should al-Bāqillānī be more deserving to be branded an Unbeliever for going against the Ash'arite school than the Ash'arites would be for going against al-Bāqillānī? Why should one of these parties enjoy a monopoly over the truth to the exclusion of the other?

Is it on the basis of who preceded whom in time? If this be the case, then al-Ash'arī<sup>6</sup> was himself preceded by others like the Mu'tazilites. Let the truth, then, rest with precedence. Or is it on the basis of one possessing more virtue and knowledge than the other? But by what scale and by what measuring device is this knowledge and virtue to be quantified, such that it would be proper for him to claim that no one in existence is more virtuous than the one he has chosen to follow?

If, on the other hand, it is permissible for al-Bāqillānī to go against the Ash'arite school, why should this be denied to others? What is the difference between al-Bāqillānī and al-Karābīsī<sup>7</sup> or al-Qalānīsī<sup>8</sup> and others? On what basis do we restrict this licence (to al-Bāqillānī)?

If he claims that the disagreement with al-Bāqillānī is really only a disagreement over terminology as opposed to substance—as some biased partisans have tried to insist through forced and

affected arguments, claiming that both parties are really in agreement on the eternity of (God's) existence and that the disagreement over whether this eternity is consubstantial with God's essence or is an attribute added to and distinct from that essence is really a minor disagreement that does not call for either party to take a strong position against the other—then why does he have such strong words for the Mu'tazilite regarding the latter's negation of the divine attributes (qua attributes) while fully acknowledging that God is knowing and has knowledge of all things, and that He is powerful and has power over all possibilities, his disagreement with the Ash'arites being simply over whether God is knowing and powerful by His essence or by an attribute (viz., knowledge, power) that is distinct from His essence? What is the difference between these two disagreements? And what issue could be more momentous and more serious than scholarly inquiry into the negation versus the acknowledgment of the attributes of God?

If he says,

I simply deem the Mu'tazilite an Unbeliever because he claims that knowledge, power, life, etc. emerge from a single essence, while these things all differ from each other both in terms of their definition and their reality, and it is impossible for different realities to be described as an undifferentiated unit or for a single essence to represent them all,

then why does he not look askance at the Ash'arite when the latter says that speech (*kalām*) is an attribute distinct from essence that attaches to the essence of God, while it remains a single reality that manifests itself as Torah, Gospels, Psalms, and Qur'ān? Indeed, it includes commands, prohibitions, reports, and inquiries; and all of these are different realities. And how could they not be, while the definition of a report is 'that which is subject to being believed or disbelieved,' while no such definition applies to commands and prohibitions? How could these things constitute a single reality that is both subject to and not subject to

being believed or disbelieved, which would amount to an attribute and its opposite applying to a single entity?

Now, if he fumbles about trying to find answers to these questions, or proves incapable of clarifying these matters, know that he is not a thinker but a mere follower (*muqallid*). And among the restrictions that go along with being a follower is that one not take it upon oneself to address (scholarly) issues; nor should others address one (about such issues), because (as a follower) one is not capable of travelling the path of (sound) rational argument. For were one capable of doing so, one would not be a follower but one who is followed; one would be someone's *imām*, rather than the other way around.

So when a mere follower engages in (intellectual) argument, this constitutes no more than prurient meddling on his part. And one who indulges him is like a man who tries to beat (horseshoes out of) cold steel, or one who tries to restore to freshness what time has already spoiled. But, alas, how can the perfume-merchant restore to freshness what time has already ravaged?

If you are fair, you will probably know that one who gives any particular thinker a monopoly over the truth is himself closer to being guilty of both Unbelief and contradictoriness. As for his being closer to Unbelief, this is because he puts this thinker in the position of the Prophet, who alone is exempt from committing errors (in doctrine), and through whom alone faith (*īmān*) obtains by agreeing with him and Unbelief obtains by disagreeing with him. As for his being closer to contradictoriness, this is because every thinker holds rational inquiry to be a personal obligation, and that one should give assent only to the results of his own rational inquiry, and that the results of this inquiry constitute a (binding) proof (for him). But what is the difference between one who says, 'Follow me in my doctrine,' and one who says, 'Follow me in both my doctrine and my proof'? Is this not a contradiction?<sup>9</sup>

## IV

After suffering all the contradictions of the various factions of blind followers, you may desire to know the (true) definition of 'Unbelief'. Know that a full explanation of this matter would be quite long, and the means through which it might be fully apprehended are quite subtle and elusive. But I will provide you with a sound criterion which you should apply evenly across the board, that it may serve to keep your inquiry focused (on the real issue) and provide you with a means of avoiding the error of condemning various groups as Unbelievers and of casting aspersions on the people of Islam—however much their ways may differ—while they hold fast to the statement, 'There is no god but God; Muhammad is His messenger,' being sincere therein and not categorically contradicting it in any way. Thus I say:

'Unbelief (*kufr*)' is to deem anything the Prophet brought to be a lie. And 'faith (*īmān*)' is to deem everything he brought to be true. Thus, the Jew and the Christian are Unbelievers because they deny the truthfulness of the Prophet\*.<sup>10</sup> Deists are all the more Unbelievers because, in addition to our messenger, they reject all of the messengers.<sup>11</sup> Atheists (*dahriyūn*) are even moreso Unbelievers because, in addition to our messenger who was sent to us, they reject the very God who sends the prophets altogether.<sup>12</sup>

Now, all of this is based on the fact that 'Unbelief' is a legal designation (*ḥukm shar'ī*), like slavery and freedom, its implication being the licitness of shedding the blood of one (so designated)<sup>13</sup> and passing a judgement upon him to the effect that he will dwell in the Hellfire forever. And since this is a legal designation, it can only be known on the basis of either an explicit text from scripture (*naṣṣ*) or an analogy (*qiyās*) drawn from an explicit text. Now, there are explicit texts regarding the (status of) Jews and Christians. Deists, Dualists, Crypto-infidels (*al-zanādiqa/s. zindīq*), and Atheists are assigned the same status on *a fortiori* grounds. And all of these parties are associationists (*mushrikūn*) inasmuch as all of them deem one or more of the

prophets to be a liar.<sup>14</sup> Hence, every Unbeliever deems one or more of the prophets to be a liar. And every one who deems one or more of the prophets to be a liar is an Unbeliever. This is the criterion that should be applied evenly across the board.

## V

Know, however, that the simplicity of this criterion notwithstanding, additional considerations—nay, the very crux of the matter—lurk beneath its surface. For every group accuses those who hold views contrary to its own of being Unbelievers and of deeming the Prophet\* to be a liar. The Ḥanbalite, for example, brands the Ash‘arite an Unbeliever, claiming that the latter deems the Prophet to be a liar in his attribution of aboveness (*al-fawq*) and (a literal) mounting of the Throne (*al-istiwā’* ‘*alā* ‘*l-‘arsh*) to God. The Ash‘arite brands the Ḥanbalite an Unbeliever, claiming the latter to be an anthropomorphist (*mushabbih*) who deems the Prophet to be a liar when he says (about God), ‘Nothing is anything like Him’. The Ash‘arite brands the Mu‘tazilite an Unbeliever, claiming that the Mu‘tazilite deems the Prophet to be a liar when the latter informs us of the beatific vision (*ru’yat Allāh*), and of God’s knowledge, power, and (other) attributes. The Mu‘tazilite brands the Ash‘arite an Unbeliever, claiming that (the latter’s) belief in the divine attributes constitutes (belief in) a multiplicity of eternals and a denial of the truth of what the Prophet taught in the way of monotheism (*tawḥīd*). And nothing will free you from the likes of this dilemma save a firm grasp of the meaning of ‘deeming to be a lie (*takdhīb*)’ and ‘deeming to be true (*taṣḍīq*)’, and the reality of how these designations apply to statements by the Prophet. But once this becomes clear to you, so too will the extremism of those groups that go around branding each other Unbelievers. And it is to this end that I say:

‘Deeming to be true (or truthful)’ can apply to a statement itself or to the author of a statement. And the reality of ‘deeming to be true’ (as applies to assertions by the Prophet) is to



*acknowledge the existence of everything whose existence the Prophet\* informed us of.* 'Existence' (*wujūd*), however, is of five levels. And it is only because of their obliviousness to this fact that all of the groups accuse their adversaries of deeming some or another aspect of what the Prophet taught to be a lie. Existence, meanwhile, can be: 1) ontological (*dhātī*); 2) sensory (*ḥissī*); 3) conceptual (*khayālī*); 4) noetic ('*aqlī*); or 5) analogous (*shabahī*). And no one who acknowledges the existence of what the Prophet\* informed us of *on any of these five levels* can be said to be categorically deeming what the Prophet taught to be a lie. Let us explain, however, these five levels and cite a few examples (of the role they play) in figurative interpretation (*ta'wīl*).

**Ontological existence:** This refers to the real, concrete existence of things (in the world) external to both the senses and the mind. The senses and the mind, however, receive impressions of these things, which process is referred to as apprehension (*idrāk*). This is like the existence of the heavens, the earth, animals, and plants. This, in other words, is apparent reality. Nay, this is the 'existence' known to most people, other than which they know no existence.

**Sensory existence:** This refers to things that acquire form through the visual power of the eye, while they have no existence in the world outside the eye. They exist, in other words, on the level of the senses and are particular to the one whose senses grasp them, no one else sharing in their apprehension. For example, a sleeping person, or even a delirious person who is awake, may 'see' something, inasmuch as the physical image 'appears' to him. This thing, however, has no existence outside of this person's senses, such that it could be physically seen like all of the other things that exist in the world outside the senses. On the other hand, beautiful images resembling the essences of angels may appear to the prophets or the saints (*awliyā*'s. *walī*) while the latter are fully awake and healthy, just as they receive revelation (*waḥy*) and inspiration (*ilhām*) (respectively) in this state. Such people have the ability to receive in a state of full wakefulness information regarding

the unseen (*ghayb*) that others can receive only in a state of sleep. And this is due to the extreme purity of their inner natures, as reflected, for example, in the statement of the Exalted, 'And he appeared to her as a fully constituted man'.<sup>15</sup> This is similarly reflected in the fact that the Prophet\* saw Gabriel\* on several occasions. But he only saw him in his true form twice. Normally, he would see him in any one of the many forms that he (Gabriel) would assume.

This is also reflected in the fact that the Prophet\* may be seen by a person who is asleep. Indeed, the Prophet himself has stated, 'Whoever sees me in his sleep has actually seen me; for Satan cannot assume my image.'<sup>16</sup> None of this implies, however, the transfer of his actual person from his grave in Medina to the location of the sleeping person. Rather, this is simply a matter of his image (being impressed) upon the senses of the sleeping person.

Now, the reason and explanation behind all of this is quite complex, and we have gone into detail about it in some of our other works. But if you have difficulty believing what I have stated here, you can certainly believe your own eyes. So try the following: Take a live ember in which there is fire the size of a dot; then quickly move it from side to side in a straight line. It will appear as a line of fire. Then, whirl it around in a quick circular motion. It will appear as a circle of fire. Now, the line and the circle are actually seen, but they only exist on the level of your senses, not in the world outside your senses. For in each case, what exists in the outside world is only the dot of fire. It only becomes a (straight or circular) line as a consequence of your motion, while in reality no line exists at all. Yet, such lines appear to exist, absolutely, according to what you see.

Conceptual existence: This refers to the physical image of things that are normally perceived through the senses in instances where these things themselves are removed from the reach of the senses. Thus, for example, even if you close your eyes, you can produce the image of an elephant or a horse in your mind, to the point that it would be as if you were actually

seeing it. The image exists, however, in all its fullness, only in your brain, not in the outside world.

Noetic existence: This refers to instances where a thing possesses a functional nature (*rūḥ*),<sup>17</sup> an ipseity (*ḥaqīqa*), and an essence (*ma'nā*), but the mind (*'aql*) isolates its essence without positing any physical image of it in the imagination (*khayāl*), the senses (*ḥiss*), or the outside world. For example, one can perceive the physical image of a hand through the senses; or one can simply conceptualize it (in the imagination). 'Hand,' however, also connotes an essence, which is its ipseity, namely the ability to seize and strike. 'The ability to seize and strike,' then, is the 'noetic hand'. Similarly, 'pen' has a physical image. But its ipseity is that via which knowledge is recorded. This is what the mind extracts, without associating it with any physical image of bamboo, wood, or any other material belonging to those physical images (of a pen) that are apprehended by the senses or the imagination.

Analogous existence: This refers to instances wherein a thing itself does not exist, either as an image or in reality, either in the outside world or in the senses (*ḥiss*), the imagination (*khayāl*) or the mind (*'aql*), but something analogous to it that possesses some quality or attribute peculiar to it exists. This will become more easily understood when I cite examples of it during the discussion of figurative interpretation (*ta'wīl*).

These, then, are the levels on which things can be said to exist.

## VI

Now listen to some examples of these levels (of existence) as they apply to the enterprise of figurative interpretation.

As for *ontological* existence, it requires no example. For this is existence according to the apparent meaning of the term devoid of any figurative interpretation. This is simply real existence in the absolute, such as when the Prophet\* informs us of the Throne (*'arsh*), the ottoman (*kursī*), and the seven heavens. These are understood according to the apparent

meaning of these terms, devoid of any figurative interpretation. For these corporeal entities exist in their own right, whether they are apprehended by the senses or the imagination or not.

As for *sensory* existence, there are many examples of this in figurative interpretation. I will limit myself, however, to two. The first is the statement of the Prophet\*: 'Death will be brought forth on the Day of Judgement in the form of a black and white ram and slaughtered between Paradise and Hell.'<sup>18</sup> Now, whoever holds it to be a logically proven fact that death is an accident (*'arad*)—or the absence of an accident [i.e., life]—and that it is impossible for accidents to turn into bodies, will interpret this report to mean that the people who are present on the Day of Judgement will see this event and believe that the slaughtered animal is death. This, however, will exist as a fact only to their senses, not in the outside world. But this will bring them certainty that death is no longer a reality, since nothing can be expected of a thing once it has been slaughtered. As for those for whom the impossibility (of accidents turning into bodies) is not a logically proven fact, perhaps they will believe that death is actually transformed into a ram, after which time it is slaughtered.

The second example is the Prophet's\* statement: 'Paradise was presented to me inside this wall.'<sup>19</sup> Now, whoever holds it to be a logically proven fact that (whole) bodies do not intersect each other and that the smaller body cannot encompass the larger will interpret this statement to mean that Paradise was not actually transported to this wall but that the image of Paradise being in the wall presented itself to the Prophet's senses, such that it became as if he was actually seeing this. And it is not at all impossible for a large thing to appear in a small body, as one sees the sky in a small mirror. This 'seeing', however, (by the Prophet) is different from simply imagining the image of Paradise. For, there is a difference between seeing the image of the sky in a mirror, on the one hand, and closing one's eyes and apprehending the image of the sky in the mirror through the use of one's imagination, on the other.

As for *conceptual* existence, an example of this would be the Prophet's\* statement: 'As if I were looking at Jonah, the son of Matthew, wearing two wide-striped garments with short fringes, saying, "At your command," to which the mountains would respond, and God would answer, "At your command, O Jonah".'<sup>20</sup> This is obviously a reference to an image unfolding in his imagination, since the actual existence of this event preceded the existence of the Prophet\* and had long passed into non-existence. Thus, it was not in existence at the time (of the Prophet's statement). Now, it would not be unreasonable to say that this image appeared to his sense (of sight) to the point that he came to 'see' it, just as a sleeping person sees images. However, his statement, '*As if* I were looking...', gives the impression that no real seeing took place, rather only something tantamount to seeing. At any rate, the aim here is to demonstrate my point by way of representative example, not to focus on this (particular) image. In sum, everything that appears to the imagination can conceivably appear to the eye, which is what qualifies this as (a species of) 'seeing'. And rarely is the impossibility of actually seeing a thing that has been conceptualized in the imagination established through any definitive logical proof.

As for *noetic* existence, there are many examples of this. But content yourself (for the time being) with two. The first is the Prophet's\* statement: 'Whoever exits the Hellfire will be given a portion of Paradise ten times the size of the world.'<sup>21</sup> Now, the apparent meaning of this statement indicates that this portion is ten times the size of the world in length, width, and area, this comparison being grounded in the senses or the imagination. To this, however, one might object in amazement, 'Paradise is in the heavens, as has been indicated by the apparent meaning of so many (scriptural) reports. How can the sky accommodate ten times the size of the world, while the sky is itself part of the world?' Now, one versed in figurative interpretation would quell this amazement by suggesting the following: What is intended here is a semantic (*ma'nawī*), noetic comparison, not a sensory (*ḥissī*) or conceptual (*khayālī*) one. For example, one says, 'This



precious stone is equal to this horse many times over,' by which one refers to its monetary value and its essence, which the mind apprehends by abstraction, not its area, which is apprehended via the senses or the imagination.

The second example is the Prophet's\* statement: 'God fermented the clay of (which He created) Adam in His hand for forty mornings.'<sup>22</sup> Here he attributes to God a hand. But those who hold it to be logically impossible for God's hand to be a physical organ that can be apprehended through the senses or the imagination will deem this hand to be an immaterial, noetic hand. That is to say, they will affirm the essence, ipseity, and functional nature of 'hand' rather than its physical form. Now, the essence and functional nature of 'hand' is represented in that by which one seizes and strikes, does, gives and withholds things. And God the Exalted gives and withholds through the medium of His angels, as the Prophet\* has said: 'The first thing God created was the intellect, after which He said, "Through you I will give and withhold".'<sup>23</sup> Now, it is impossible for the meaning of 'intellect' here to be that accident (commonly regarded as the faculty for knowing), as the speculative theologians (*al-mutakallimūn*) believe. For it is impossible for an accident to be the first thing created. Rather, this would have to be a reference to the essence of some angel who is called 'intellect' because he apprehends things directly by his nature and essence without the intermediary of learning. Or perhaps this angel could be called 'pen,' in consideration of his role in inscribing the various forms of knowledge onto the tabulae (*alwāḥ/s. lawḥ*) of the hearts of the prophets, saints (*awliyā'/s. walī*), and other angels, either by way of revelation (*wahy*) or inspiration (*ilhām*). For it has been reported in another hadith, 'The first thing God created was the pen.'<sup>24</sup> And if what was being referred to here was not also intellect, these two hadith would pose an obvious contradiction.

It is perfectly possible, on the other hand, for a single entity to have several names, depending on the perspective from which it is viewed. Thus, this angel might be referred to as 'intellect' for the reasons we stated above. But he might be referred to as

'an angel' from the perspective of his relationship with God as the medium through which God communicates with His creatures. From the perspective of his action of inscribing the various forms of knowledge (upon people's hearts) via revelation or inspiration, he might be referred to as 'a pen'. This is like Gabriel's being called 'a spirit,' from the perspective of his (immaterial) essence, 'a confidant,' from the perspective of all the secrets entrusted to him, 'capable one (*dhū mirra*),' considering his ability, 'extremely powerful,' considering the completeness of his power, 'firmly established at the Throne,' from the perspective of his rank in closeness to God, and 'obeyed,' considering that he exercises authority over some of the angels.

The point in all of this is that anyone who subscribes to (any of the above-cited figurative interpretations of pen or hand) affirms the existence of a noetic pen or hand, not a pen or hand perceived through the senses (*ḥiss*) or conceived of in the imagination (*khayāl*). Similar to this is the case of one who holds 'hand' to refer to one of God's attributes such as power or some other attribute, as the speculative theologians do, though the latter differ as to which attribute is actually intended.

As for *analogous* existence, an example of this would be anger, or longing or joy or patience or any of those sentiments attributed to God the Exalted in reports that have come down to us. For the reality of anger, for example, is the boiling of blood in the heart engendered by a desire to satisfy one's thirst for vengeance. And this inevitably entails suffering a flaw and experiencing a measure of pain. Thus, those who hold it to be logically impossible for God to experience anger, so defined, as an ontological, sensorial, conceptual, or noetic reality, will interpret anger to refer to some other attribute which produces the same *result* as anger, such as the will to punish. And while will may be unrelated to anger in terms of its essence, it does relate to an attribute that goes along with anger and to one of the effects that results therefrom, namely the infliction of pain.

These, then, are the levels of figurative interpretation.

## VII

Know that everyone who interprets a statement of the Lawgiver in accordance with one of the preceding levels (of existence) has deemed such statements to be true. 'Deeming a statement to be a lie (*takdhīb*),' on the other hand, is to deny its correspondence to any of these levels and to claim that it represents no reality at all, that it is a pure lie, and that the Lawgiver's aim in delivering it was simply to deceive people or to promote the (putative) common good (*maṣlaḥa*). This is pure Unbelief and masked-infidelity (*zandaqa*). Other than this, however, it is improper to brand as an Unbeliever anyone who engages in figurative interpretation, as long as he observes the Rule of Figurative Interpretation (*Qānūn al-ta'wīl*), which we will elaborate below. And how could it be proper to brand such figurative interpreters Unbelievers, while there is not a party among the people of Islam who do not find themselves compelled to engage in figurative interpretation? Indeed, among those most disdainful of figurative interpretation was Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, may God show him mercy. And the most remote and exotic forms of figurative interpretations are those in which a statement is treated allegorically or metaphorically, these corresponding to noetic (*'aqlī*) and analogous (*shabahī*) existence, respectively. Yet the Ḥanbalite is compelled to engage in this practice, and indeed openly advocates positions based thereupon. Indeed, I heard trusted men among their leaders in Baghdad say that Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, may God show him mercy, explicitly stated that he figuratively interpreted three hadiths, though he limited this practice to these three alone. The first was the statement of the Prophet\*: 'The Black Stone is the right (hand) of God on earth.'<sup>25</sup> The second was the Prophet's\* statement: 'The heart of the faithful (*qalb al-mu'min*) is between two of the All-Merciful's fingers.'<sup>26</sup> The third was the statement of the Prophet,\* 'Indeed, I find the breath of the All-Merciful (*nafas al-raḥmān*) coming from the direction of Yemen.'<sup>27</sup> Now, notice how he figuratively interpreted these statements when he deemed their apparent meaning to be logically impossible. Thus,

he said: The right hand is customarily kissed for the purpose of drawing near to its owner; the Black Stone is similarly kissed for the purpose of drawing near to God. Thus, the Black Stone is *like* the right hand (of God), not in its essence nor in any attribute of its essence, but in one of its non-essential accoutrements, on the basis of which it is referred to as a right hand. Now, this corresponds to the level of existence that we referred to as analogous existence (*al-wujūd al-shabahī*). And this represents the most remote form of figurative interpretation. Yet, notice how the man most disdainful of figurative interpretation was compelled to take recourse to this very form.

Similarly, when he deemed it impossible for the senses to apprehend the 'two fingers' of God the Exalted, since upon checking one's breast one does not find any two fingers, he figuratively interpreted 'two fingers' to refer to the functional nature (*rūḥ*) of fingers, deeming them thereby to be noetic fingers. That is to say, the functional nature of fingers is to facilitate the turning and altering of things. And the human heart is poised between the grip of the angels and the grip of Satan, through whom God the Exalted turns the hearts of humans. These two entities are thus nicknamed 'the two fingers'.

Now, Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, may God be pleased with him, simply limited himself to figuratively interpreting these three hadiths because he deemed the apparent meaning of only these three to be logically impossible. But this was because he was not among those who were versed in speculative rationalism (*al-naẓar al-'aqlī*). Had he been so, the logical impossibility of other reports, such as those implying (God's) aboveness and others which he did not interpret figuratively, would have also appeared to him. Indeed, it was only due to their having delved more deeply into this science that the Ash'arites and the Mu'tazilites went beyond this to subject the apparent meanings of many other texts to figurative interpretation.

Now, the closest people to the Ḥanbalites as far as their understanding of matters of the Afterlife (*umūr al-ākhirā*)<sup>28</sup> is concerned are the Ash'arites, may God grant them success. They endorse the apparent meaning of most reports about the Afterlife,

with only a few exceptions. The Mu'tazilites, meanwhile, are more prone to getting caught up in (all types of) figurative interpretation. Yet even they, I mean the Ash'arites, find themselves compelled to resort to figurative interpretation in treating a number of reports (about the Afterlife), such as the case we cited above regarding the Prophet's\* statement, 'Death will be brought forth in the form of a black and white ram,' and such as (their treatment of) the reports on 'weighing deeds' in scales, which they interpret figuratively, saying that the scrolls (containing the records) of deeds are (what will actually be) weighed, God creating in them weight corresponding to the magnitude of the deeds performed.<sup>29</sup> This, however, entails having recourse to (an affirmation of) analogous existence (*al-wujūd al-shabahī*), which, again, is quite remote. For the scrolls are corporeal bodies upon which is written encoded data corresponding to the deeds, which are themselves accidents (*a'rād/s. 'arād*). That is to say, what is actually weighed is not the deeds themselves but the corporeal mass upon which the encoded data corresponding to the deeds is written.

The Mu'tazilite, on the other hand, figuratively interprets 'scale' itself, making it a synecdochic reference to a cause through which the magnitude of everyone's deeds will be made known to them. And this is actually less arbitrary than the figurative interpretation involving the weighing of scrolls.

The aim in all of this, however, is not to judge either of these interpretations to be correct. Rather, the aim is simply to make you aware that every party, even those who go to extremes in holding to the apparent meanings of texts, finds itself compelled to figurative interpretation. Otherwise, they would end up going beyond all bounds of stupidity and feigned ignorance, affirming, for example, that the Black Stone is literally the right hand (of God), or that death, even if it is an accident, transforms (itself) and turns into a ram by way of transfiguration (*inqilāb*), or that deeds, even if they are accidents that have passed into non-existence, are transferred to scales that end up weighing accidents possessed of weight! And whoever ends up at this level of ignorance has cast off the yoke of reason.



## VIII

Listen now to the Rule of Figurative Interpretation. You already know that all of the parties agree on the aforementioned five levels of figurative interpretation,<sup>30</sup> and that none of these levels falls within the scope of 'deeming a statement to be a lie'. They also agree, however, that the permissibility of engaging in figurative interpretation is contingent upon having established the logical impossibility of the apparent meaning (*ẓāhir*) of a text. The first level of apparent meaning corresponds to ontological (*dhātī*) existence. Whenever this is conceded, the remaining levels are entailed. If this proves (logically) impossible, however, one moves to the level of sensory existence (*ḥissī*), for it too embraces those levels below it. If this proves impossible, one moves to the level of conceptual (*khayālī*) or noetic ('*aqlī*) existence. And if this proves impossible, one moves to the level of analogous, allegorical existence (*al-wujūd al-shabahī al-majāzī*).

Now, no one is permitted to move from one level (of interpretation) to a level beneath it without being compelled by logical proof (*burhān*). Thus, in reality, the differences among the various parties revert to (differences regarding) logical proofs. In other words, the Ḥanbalite says that there is no logical proof affirming the impossibility of aboveness being the domain of the Creator. And the Ash'arite says that there is no logical proof affirming the impossibility of the beatific vision. In other words, it is as if each party is simply dissatisfied with the justification adduced by its opponent and does not deem it to constitute a definitive proof. But however the matter may be, neither party should brand its opponent an Unbeliever simply because it deems the latter to be mistaken in what it holds to be a logical proof. Granted, one party may hold the other to be misguided (*dāll*) or to be guilty of unsanctioned innovation (*mubtadi*). As for being misguided, this may be said inasmuch as they veer away from what the one (judging them) holds to be the right path. As for being guilty of unsanctioned innovation, this may be said inasmuch as they (may be understood to have)

innovated a doctrine that the Pious Ancestors were not known to have openly advocated, it being well-known, for example, that the Pious Ancestors held that God will be seen in the Hereafter. Thus, for anyone to say that He will not be seen is for them to be guilty of unsanctioned innovation. So is it for them to advocate openly a figurative interpretation of the beatific vision. In fact, if it should appear to one that the meaning of this beatific vision is simply a seeing that takes place in the heart, one should neither disclose nor mention this, because the Ancestors did not mention it.

At this point, however, the Ḥanbalite might say: Affirming the aboveness (*al-fawq*) of God is well-known among the Ancestors, as is the fact that none of them ever said that the Creator of the universe is neither connected to nor disconnected from the universe, nor (that He is) neither within nor outside of it. Nor (did they say) that the six directions<sup>31</sup> are devoid of Him, or that His relationship to the direction of up is like His relationship to the direction of down. All of these statements constitute, therefore, unsanctioned innovations, since 'unsanctioned innovation' (*bid'a*) refers to the origination of a doctrine that has not been handed down on the authority of the Ancestors.

It is here that it should be made clear to you that there are two vantage-points (from which these matters might be considered).

The first is that of the masses (*'awāmm al-khalq*). The proper thing for them to do is to follow (established doctrine) and to desist forthwith from altering the apparent meanings of texts. They should beware of innovating proclamations of figurative interpretations that were not so proclaimed by the Companions; and they should close the door at once to raising questions about such things. They should refrain from delving into speculative discussions and inquiries and from following the ambiguous passages of the Qur'ān and Sunna. Indeed, it was related in this regard on the authority of 'Umar, may God be pleased with him, that a man once asked him about the meaning of two (apparently) contradictory verses, to which 'Umar

responded by mounting him with a whip. And it was related on the authority of Mālik, God show him mercy, that he was once asked about mounting (the Throne), to which he responded: '(The fact of) mounting is known; acknowledging it is obligatory; its modality is unknown; and asking about it is unsanctioned innovation.'

The second vantage-point is that of the speculative theoreticians (*al-nuẓẓār*) who come to harbour misgivings about inherited theological doctrines handed down from the past. Their investigations should not go beyond what is absolutely necessary. And they should only abandon the apparent meaning of a text upon being compelled by some definitive logical proof. Moreover, none of them should condemn the others as Unbelievers because he holds the latter to be mistaken in what they believe to be a logical proof; for rendering such judgements is no trifling matter that is easily substantiated. Instead, let them establish among themselves a mutually agreed-upon criterion for determining the validity of logical proofs that enjoys the recognition of them all. For if they do not agree on the scale by which a thing is to be measured, they will not be able to terminate disputes over its weight. We have cited the five (probative) scales in our book, *al-Qiṣṭās al-mustaqīm*.<sup>32</sup> These are the scales regarding the validity of which it is inconceivable that anyone disagree, assuming that they have been properly understood. Indeed, everyone who understands these scales acknowledges them to be an absolute means to certainty. And for those who have mastered them, dispensing and exacting fairness, exposing (the subtleties of difficult) matters, and terminating disputes become matters of ease.

None of this precludes, of course, the possibility that the various parties may (continue to) differ with each other. For such may result from a failure of some of them to satisfy all the prerequisites (to the use of these scales). Or it may be due to their abandoning these scales and measures during the course of inquiry in favour of a strict reliance upon natural talent and disposition, like one who, after mastering the metres of poetry, returns to relying upon his innate sense of taste in order to

escape the drudgery of having to calibrate the metre of each individual line. Such a person will be prone to making mistakes. Or it may be due to differences in (the level of mastery of) the various sciences relied upon in forming the propositions of logical syllogisms. Indeed, among the sciences that are basic to logical syllogisms are empirical (*tajrībī*) sciences, sciences that are based on diffuse and congruent reports (*tawāturi*), and other sciences. And people differ in terms of their experience and exposure to diffusely congruent reports from the past. Indeed, one person may deem a report to be diffuse and congruent while another person does not; and one person may experience a thing that another does not. Or it may be due to a confusion between supposititious (*wahmī*) and rational (*‘aqlī*) assumptions. Or it may be due to the tendency to confuse words that are widespread, commonly used, and positive in meaning, with *a priori* categories and first principles, as we have explained in detail in our book, *Mihakk al-naẓar*.<sup>33</sup>

In the end, however, if they master these scales and carefully perfect their use, they will be able to identify mistakes with ease, assuming, that is, that they are willing to abandon obstinacy.

## IX

There are, on the other hand, people who rush to figurative interpretation under the influence of speculative presumptions rather than on the basis of definitive logical proofs. Even these people, however, should not in every instance be immediately branded Unbelievers. Rather, one should observe. If their figurative interpretation pertains to a matter that is not connected with the basic principles and requirements of creed, we do not brand them Unbelievers. An example of this would be the statement of some Sufis to the effect that what is meant by (the prophet) Abraham's\* seeing the stars, moon, and sun, along with his statement, 'This is my lord,'<sup>34</sup> is not the apparent meaning of these things but rather angelic, luminous essences, whose luminosity is noetic rather than perceptual and whose

essences are characterized by ascending levels of perfection, the level of disparity between them being like the level of disparity between the stars, the sun, and the moon.<sup>35</sup> They support this on the argument that Abraham\* was too noble to have to see a body disappear before coming to the belief that it could not be his god. Had this body not disappeared (they argue), do you think that he would have taken it to be his god, despite his (prior) knowledge of the impossibility of godhood resting with created bodies? They also ask, 'How was it possible for the stars to be the first thing he saw, when the sun is more prominent (than the stars) and is (usually) the first (celestial body) a person sees?' And they point to the fact that God the Exalted mentioned first, 'In this way we show Abraham the hidden realities of the heavens and the earth...',<sup>36</sup> after which time Abraham is cited as having spoken the words in the aforementioned verse. How was it possible (they argue) for him to suppose (that these things were his Lord) after the hidden realities had already been revealed to him?

All of these arguments are based on speculative presumption (*ẓann*), not logical proof (*burhān*). As for their statement, 'He was too noble to...', it has been said that Abraham was a youth at the time. And there is nothing incredible about one who is to become a prophet entertaining a notion like this in his youth only to abandon it shortly thereafter.<sup>37</sup> Nor is there anything incredible about his taking the disappearance (of things) to be more of a proof of temporality than are proportionment (*taqdīr*) and corporeality (*jismīya*).

As for his seeing the stars first, it has been related that he had secluded himself in a cave as a youth and emerged (for the first time) at night.

As for the Exalted having stated first, 'In this way we show Abraham the hidden realities of the heavens and the earth...',<sup>38</sup> He may simply have mentioned the final stages of this ordeal only to return to the beginning stages subsequently. At any rate, all of these are speculative arguments that are taken to constitute logical proof (*burhān*) by people who know neither what logical proofs really are nor what is required to sustain them.



This is representative of the kind of figurative interpretation in which these people engage. They even figuratively interpret 'staff' and 'shoes' in God's statement, 'Take off your shoes,'<sup>39</sup> and 'Throw down what you have in your right hand.'<sup>40</sup> And perhaps they should be given the benefit of the doubt regarding such interpretations that are not connected with basic principles of creed, just as we treat (differences over) logical proofs in connection with (questions on) basic principles of creed. They should be neither branded Unbelievers nor deemed guilty of unsanctioned innovation. Granted, if opening the door to this (kind of interpretive activity) leads to confusing the minds of the masses, then charges of unsanctioned innovation should be levelled specifically against those who engage in this activity regarding those views of theirs that have not been handed down on the authority of the Pious Ancestors.

Similar to the above is the view of some of the Bāṭinites<sup>41</sup> to the effect that the 'calf' of the Samaritan<sup>42</sup> is a figure of speech, since it is not likely that a large population of people would be devoid of rational individuals who knew that a thing fashioned from gold could not be a god. This too is speculative. For it is not at all impossible for a large group of people to come to such a conclusion, as is attested to by (the existence of entire communities of) idol worshippers. The fact that this is rare yields no certainty whatever (of its impossibility or non-existence).

As for that material that is connected to the fundamental principles of creed, anyone who alters the apparent meaning of a text without a definitive logical proof must be branded an Unbeliever, like those who deny the resurrection of the body and the occurrence of sentient punishment in the Hereafter on the basis of speculative presumptions, suppositions, and assumed improbabilities in the absence of any definitive logical proof. Such persons must be branded Unbelievers, absolutely. For there is no logical proof to attest to the impossibility of souls being returned to bodies. Moreover, public proclamations of such beliefs are extremely detrimental to religion. Thus, everyone

who attaches himself to such beliefs must be branded an Unbeliever. And this includes most of the philosophers.

Similarly, those who say that God the Exalted knows nothing other than Himself must be branded Unbelievers. Likewise with those who say that He knows only universals, concrete particulars connected with individual things and events falling outside His knowledge. For all of this constitutes an act of deeming what the Prophet\* taught to be a lie, absolutely. It has nothing to do with what we mentioned regarding the different levels of figurative interpretation. For the evidence contained in the Qur'ān and the reports (handed down from the Prophet) teaching of the resurrection of bodies and of God having knowledge of the concrete particulars affecting individuals are too numerous to accommodate figurative interpretation. Moreover, the philosophers admit that they are not engaged in figurative interpretation. Instead, they say: Since it is in the interest of the people to believe in the resurrection of bodies, because of the inability of their minds to grasp the meaning of a noetic resurrection (*ma'ād 'aqlī*), and since it is in their interest to believe that God the Exalted knows what befalls them and that He watches over them so that this can generate hope and fear in their hearts, it was permissible for the Messenger\* to give them this understanding. And anyone whose aim it is to improve the condition of others by telling them that which promotes their interests cannot (really) be deemed a liar, even if what he teaches them is factually untrue.

This view of theirs is absolutely false, for it amounts to an explicit claim that the Prophet\* lied, followed by an attempt to cover this up with an excuse that would effectively deny that what he did was properly an act of lying. But the office of prophethood must be raised above such depravity. For truthfulness and the efficacy of reforming people through truth negates any need for lying.

This view of theirs represents, however, only the first level of masked infidelity (*zandaqa*). And this is a level that falls between Mu'tazilism and masked infidelity in the absolute (*al-zandaqa al-muṭlaqa*).<sup>43</sup> Indeed, the approach of the

Mu'tazilites comes close to that of the philosophers, with one exception, namely, that the Mu'tazilites do not hold it to be permissible for the Prophet\* to lie, on the basis of such (aforementioned) excuses. Instead, they figuratively interpret the apparent meaning of scripture whenever it appears to them to contradict some logical proof. The philosopher, on the other hand, in going beyond the apparent meaning of scripture, does not confine himself to texts that might accommodate figurative interpretation, obvious or remote. As for (the above-mentioned) masked infidelity in the absolute (*al-zandaqa al-muṭlaqa*), it denies the resurrection *in toto*, on the level of noetic and perceptual reality. And it denies that the universe has a Creator at all, categorically and straightaway.

As for affirming the resurrection as a type of noetic reality devoid of sentient pleasures and pain, and affirming the existence of the Creator while denying that He has knowledge of particulars, this is masked infidelity qualified by some recognition of the truthfulness of the prophets. And it appears to me, and knowledge rests with God, that those who hold such views are the people referred to by the Prophet\* in his statement: 'My community will divide into over seventy sects; all of them will enter Paradise except the Crypto-infidels.'<sup>44</sup> This refers to a sect (of ostensibly Muslim infidels), according to the literal wording of the hadith in some of its narrations. For the literal wording of the hadith indicates that he was referring to the Crypto-infidels from among *his* community, inasmuch as he said, '*My community* will divide...' Now, anyone who does not acknowledge his prophethood is not from his community. And those who deny the resurrection and the existence of the Creator outright do not acknowledge his prophethood. For they claim that death is simply a pure privation (*'adam maḥḍ*) and that the world has existed on its own from sempiternity without a creator. They do not acknowledge the existence of God or the reality of the Last Day, and they charge the prophets with intentional deception. It is not possible, therefore, to include them in the community. Thus, the meaning of 'the Crypto-infidels of this

community' must correspond to what we mentioned (regarding ostensibly Muslim infidels).

## X

Know that a full explanation of the grounds on which a person may or may not be branded an Unbeliever would require a long and detailed discussion covering all of the various doctrines and schools of thought along with the proofs and pseudo-proofs adduced by each, as well as the manner in which they depart from the apparent meaning of scripture and the degree to which they rely on figurative interpretation. Several volumes would not be enough to cover all of this. Nor do I have time to explain it all. So, for the time being, content yourself with a piece of advice and a maxim.

As for the Advice, it is that you restrain your tongue, to the best of your ability, from indicting the people who face Mecca (on charges of Unbelief) as long as they say, 'There is no god but God, Muhammad is the messenger of God,' without categorically contradicting this. And for them to contradict this categorically is for them to affirm the possibility that the Prophet,\* with or without an excuse, delivered lies. Indeed, branding people Unbelievers is a serious matter. Remaining silent, on the other hand, entails no liability at all.

As for the Maxim, it is that you know that speculative matters (*al-naẓariyāt*) are of two types. One is connected with the fundamental principles of creed, the other with secondary issues. The fundamental principles are acknowledging the existence of God, the prophethood of his Prophet, and the reality of the Last Day. Everything else is secondary.

Know that there should be no branding any person an Unbeliever over any secondary issue whatsoever, as a matter of principle, with one exception: that such a person reject a religious tenet that was learned from the Prophet\* and passed down via diffusely congruent channels (*tawātur*). Even here, however, regarding some matters he may simply be subject to being deemed wrong, as is done with legal issues. Or he may be

subject to condemnation for unsanctioned innovation (*bid'a*), such as with wrong ideas regarding the Caliphate and the status of the Companions.

Know, however, that error regarding the status of the Caliphate, whether or not establishing this office is a (communal) obligation, who qualifies for it, and related matters, cannot serve as grounds for condemning people as Unbelievers. Indeed, Ibn Kaysān<sup>45</sup> denied that there was any religious obligation to have a Caliphate at all; but this does not mean that he must be branded an Unbeliever. Nor do we pay any attention to those who exaggerate the matter of the Imāmate and equate recognition of the Imām with faith in God and His Messenger. Nor do we pay any attention to those who oppose these people and brand them Unbelievers simply on the basis of their doctrine on the Imāmate. Both of these positions are extreme. For neither of the doctrines in question entails any claim that the Prophet\* perpetrated lies.

On the other hand, anyone who claims that the Prophet\* lied must be condemned as an Unbeliever, even if this claim of his involves a secondary issue. Thus, for example, were someone to say that the House at Mecca is not the Ka'ba to which God commanded people to make pilgrimage, this would constitute an act of Unbelief. For this claim is contradicted by that which has been established on the authority of the Prophet\* via diffusely congruent channels (*tawātur*). And were this person to deny (in order to avoid censure) that the Prophet\* ever gave any explicit testimony to the effect that this very House was the Ka'ba, this would not avail him. Rather, we would know, absolutely, that his denial was simply an act of stubbornness, unless he happened to be newly converted to Islam and this information had not yet reached him through diffusely congruent channels. Likewise, a person who accuses 'Ā'isha, may God be pleased with her, of committing indecency, while the Qur'ān has clearly established her innocence, would be guilty of Unbelief.<sup>46</sup> For such claims can only be maintained either by deeming the Prophet to have lied or by denying (the authority of) diffuse congruence (*tawātur*). And while a person may deny



(the authority of) diffuse congruence with his tongue, he cannot ignore the knowledge it produces in his heart.

To be sure, were a person to deny the truth of an isolated report (*khābar aḥādī*), there would be no duty to brand him an Unbeliever. Were he to deny, on the other hand, that upon which there was unanimous consensus (*ijmā'*), his case would be unclear. For knowledge of whether or not consensus is itself a definitive proof is fraught with ambiguities the likes of which only those who have mastered the discipline of legal theory (*uṣūl al-fiqh*) can bring into relief. Indeed, al-Nazzām<sup>47</sup> denied the status of consensus as a valid proof altogether. Thus, the status of consensus as a valid proof is itself disputed (*mukhtalaf fih*). This, then, is the ruling regarding secondary issues.

As for the three fundamental principles (i.e., God, the Prophet, and the Last Day) and those texts that have been transmitted via diffuse congruence and are not in and of themselves open to figurative interpretation and for which one cannot conceive of any logical proofs that would contradict their content, to contradict these is to say that they constitute lies, pure and simple, as, for example, with the resurrection of bodies, Paradise, Hell, and God's knowledge of particulars, as we cited earlier.

Regarding those texts, however, that are open to figurative interpretation, albeit even remote allegorical interpretations, here we examine the logical proof (adduced to justify the figurative interpretation). If it is definitive it must be accepted. But if divulging this to the masses poses a threat, because of their inability to understand it, then to divulge this would constitute an unsanctioned innovation (*bid'a*). If, on the other hand, the logical proof is not definitive but gives rise to a preponderance of probability while not posing any known threat to religion, such as (that underlying) the Mu'tazilites' negation of the beatific vision, then this constitutes an unsanctioned innovation, not an act of Unbelief. As for those matters that appear to pose a threat to religion, determining their (legal) status is subject to scholarly discretion (*ijtihād*) and speculative inquiry. They may constitute a basis for branding a person an Unbeliever, and they may not.

Included among such matters would be the claims of some who style themselves Sufis to the effect that they have reached a state between themselves and God wherein they are no longer obligated to pray, and that drinking wine, devouring state funds, and other forms of disobedience are rendered licit to them. Such people, without doubt, must be executed, even if there remains some question as to whether they will abide in the Hellfire forever. Indeed, executing one of these people is better than killing a hundred (open) Unbelievers, because the harm they bring to religion is greater (than that caused by the latter), and because they open doors to libertinism that can never be closed. In fact, the harm these people cause is greater than that caused by those who advocate libertinism outright. For the latter's open Unbelief generally discourages people from listening to them. As for these people, they destroy the religious law through the religious law itself by claiming that they do nothing more than limit the scope of general injunctions by restricting general religious duties to those who have not reached the level of religiosity that they have reached. They may even claim that their involvement in all kinds of acts of disobedience is only apparent, while in reality they are innocent of this.<sup>48</sup> As a result, however, all kinds of miscreants take to wrapping themselves in similar claims. And in this way the bonds of religion are undone.

One should not think, incidentally, that either branding a person an Unbeliever or its negation must be based on certainty in every case. On the contrary, 'Unbelief' is a legal designation (*ḥukm shar'ī*) that refers to 1) a person's loss of property rights; 2) the licitness of shedding his blood; and 3) his dwelling in the Hellfire forever.<sup>49</sup> As such, the basis upon which it is established is the same as that upon which the rest of the rules of the religious law are established: sometimes they are based on certainty; sometimes on a preponderance of probability; and sometimes on sources to which one cannot fully commit either way. And whenever one finds oneself unable to commit (to his would-be source), he should refrain from branding a person an Unbeliever.<sup>50</sup> Indeed, rushing to brand people Unbelievers is the habit of those whose natures have been overrun by ignorance.

Having said this much, we must draw your attention to another Maxim, namely, that those who contradict scripture may do so by contradicting texts that have been handed down via diffusely congruent channels while claiming that they are simply interpreting these figuratively. Meanwhile, their figurative interpretations have no basis in language, either as obvious or as remote figurative interpretations. This is Unbelief; and those who engage in this are saying that scripture contains lies, even if they claim that they are simply engaging in figurative interpretation.

An example of this would be what I have seen in the writings of one of the Bāṭinites to the effect that God the Exalted is one in the sense that He gives oneness and creates it, that He is knowing in the sense that He gives knowledge to others and creates it, and that He exists in the sense that He brings others into existence. As for His being one in essence, and existing and knowing in the sense of being characterized by these attributes, this he held to be false. Now, this is Unbelief, plain and simple. For interpreting 'The One' to mean 'bringing oneness into existence' has no basis whatever in figurative interpretation; nor does the Arabic language in any way accommodate this. Indeed, if the creator of oneness could be called 'creator' because he created oneness, he could be called 'three' or 'four' because he created these numbers as well. These doctrines and their likes constitute acts of deeming scripture to contain lies dressed up in the guise of figurative interpretation.

## XI

By now you should understand, based on the aforementioned examples, that investigating suspected instances of Unbelief entails (at least) the following:

- 1) Investigating whether the text of scripture whose apparent meaning has been abandoned is open to figurative interpretation or not. If it is, is it open to obvious or remote figurative interpretation? And knowing what is and what is not open to figurative interpretation is not an easy matter. On the contrary,

the only people who can make such determinations are those who are proficient and well-versed in the (Arabic) language, knowledgeable of its fundamental structures, and well-acquainted with the customs of the Arabs in using metaphors and figures of speech and the various ways in which they construct similes.

2) Investigating whether the abandoned text was an isolated report, or one whose validity was established on the basis of diffuse congruence (*tawātur*), or one whose validity rests on mere consensus. If it is established on the basis of diffuse congruence, were all of the conditions of diffuse congruence actually fulfilled? Indeed, a report that is simply widely known (*mustafīd*) may be mistakenly thought to be diffusely congruent. By definition, however, 'diffuse congruence' means that a report is not open to any doubt, such as obtains in the case of knowledge of the existence of the prophets and commonly known countries and the like. Moreover, it must remain diffusely congruent over the ages, generation after generation, going all the way back to the time of the Prophet. Is it conceivable that the number of transmitters required to sustain diffuse congruence could have fallen below the required level during any of these generations, while the very impossibility of such an occurrence is one of the requirements of diffuse congruence to begin with, such as obtains in the case of the Qur'ān? As for (texts) other than the Qur'ān, making such a determination is extremely difficult. And only those who study the books of history, the conditions of bygone generations, the books of hadith, the status and conditions of the transmitters of reports, as well as their objectives in transmitting the doctrines they transmit, can successfully undertake such a task. For the *number* required to sustain diffuse congruence may obtain in every generation without this giving rise to knowledge. For it is conceivable for a large number of people to be bound by ties of mutual interest, especially following the setting in of partisanship (*ta'aṣṣub*) among the advocates of the various schools of thought. Thus, for example, due to the intensity of their mutual interest to sustain and follow their lies, you see the Shi'ites claiming the

existence of a text designating 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, may God be pleased with him, as Imām and successor to the Prophet, simply because such a text has been circulated and handed down among them via diffuse congruence. Meanwhile, an abundance of material contradicting their claims has been handed down via diffuse congruence among their opponents.

As for those reports whose validity rests upon consensus, establishing this is one of the most allusive of things. For a precondition for affirming consensus is that those whose voices make it up (*ahl al-ḥall wa al-'aqd*) gather in a single place and explicitly express their unanimous agreement, then continue in this agreement—for a period, according to some, or up until the close of that generation, according to others. Or a Caliph may write to the various districts to gather the responsa of the jurists within a specified period of time, such that their views add up to an explicit unanimous agreement and it becomes impossible for them to go back on this or to fall into disagreement subsequently.

Even here, however, there is some question as to whether one who subsequently contradicts this agreement is to be branded an Unbeliever. For there are some who say that, since it was permissible for him to disagree during the period in which agreement was reached, their mutual recognition of each other's views is simply *interpreted* to constitute a consensus of opinion.<sup>51</sup> This, however, does not preclude the possibility of one of them subsequently contradicting this (apparent agreement). This too, however, is an extremely difficult point to apprehend.

3) Investigating whether the advocate of a doctrine had access to the text he purportedly violated through diffuse congruence or consensus. For not everyone has access to information based on diffuse congruence. Nor is he necessarily able to distinguish those points on which there is consensus from those that are the subject of disagreement. Rather, these things are acquired gradually over time, by poring over the books that catalogue consensus and disagreement among the Ancestors. Moreover, such knowledge cannot be acquired by reading one or two of



these books. For one or two books are not enough to ground a consensus in diffuse congruence. Indeed, Abū Bakr al-Fārisī,<sup>52</sup> may God have mercy on him, composed a book purportedly cataloguing the issues concerning which there was consensus, and he was severely criticized for many of the claims he made. In fact, regarding some issues, he was even contradicted. Thus, anyone who violates a consensus that has not yet reached him must be deemed ignorant and or wrong, not guilty of denying any truth. He certainly cannot be branded an Unbeliever. At any rate, acquiring the ability to make such determinations is no mean feat.

4) Investigating whether the proof relied upon as a basis for abandoning the apparent meaning of a text qualifies as a logical proof or not. To be sure, it would take several volumes to explain what qualifies as a logical proof. And what we mentioned in *al-Qistās al-mustaqīm* and *Mihakk al-naẓar* are merely samples in this regard. Meanwhile, (most of) the scholars of the age are too dim to limit what they take to constitute logical proofs to that which fully satisfies the requirements thereof. Yet, mastery of this propadeutic is absolutely indispensable. For if a logical proof is definitive, it can serve as a licence to engage in figurative interpretation, even remote figurative interpretation. If it is not definitive, it can only serve as a licence to engage in obvious figurative interpretation whose relationship to the apparent meaning of a text is immediately apparent.

5) Investigating whether or not public disclosure of a doctrine constitutes a significant detriment to religion. Those doctrines that do not constitute a significant detriment should be treated leniently, even if they are substantively abominable and clearly absurd, such as the Twelver Shī'ite doctrine to the effect that their Imām is hiding in a vault and is expected to emerge (one day). This is a false, clearly absurd, and extremely abominable doctrine. But it poses no threat to religion. In fact, the only threat it poses is to the fool who believes in it. For he leaves his home every day with the intention of meeting his Imām until night falls and he returns frustrated and dejected. This is just an example. The point here is that not everyone who

embraces senseless hallucinations must be branded an Unbeliever, even if his doctrines are clearly absurd.

Now, if you understand that investigating suspected instances of Unbelief is contingent upon all of the preceding considerations, individual aspects of which even the most accomplished scholars are known not to have fully mastered, you will know that those who rush to condemn people who go against the Ash'arite school or any other school as Unbelievers are reckless ignoramuses. For, how could the jurist, purely on the basis of his mastery of Islamic law (*fiqh*), assume this enormous task? In what branch of the law does he encounter the (aforementioned) skills and sciences?<sup>53</sup> So when you see the jurist who knows nothing but law plunging into matters of branding people Unbelievers or condemning them as misguided, turn away from him and occupy neither your heart nor your tongue with him. For, challenging others with one's knowledge is a deeply ingrained human instinct over which the ignorant are able to exercise no control. And it is because of this that disagreement has proliferated among the people. Indeed, had those who do not know what they are doing been dismissed as such, there would be appreciably less disagreement among the people.

## XII

Among those who are most extreme and excessive (in this regard) is a party of speculative theologians (*al-mutakallimūn*) who brand common Muslims Unbelievers, and claim that whoever does not know the science of speculative theology (*kalām*) as they know it and does not know the sources of religion (*al-adilla al-shar'īya*) via the proofs they have established is an Unbeliever (*kāfir*)! First of all, these people have (unjustifiably) narrowed the scope of God's all-encompassing mercy for His servants, rendering Paradise the exclusive preserve of a small band of speculative theologians. Secondly, they have ignored aspects of the Sunna that have been handed down through diffusely congruent channels. For, it

had to occur to them that there were groups of uncivilized Arabs during the time of the Prophet\* and the Companions, may God be pleased with them, who were steeped in idol-worship and who devoted no attention at all to systematic proofs (*'ilm al-dalīl*)—and even if they had devoted attention to this they would not have understood it—who in the end were adjudged (by the Prophet and the Companions) to be Muslims. Indeed, anyone who believes that the way to faith (*īmān*) is speculative theology, abstract proofs, and systematic categorization is himself guilty of unsanctioned innovation. For faith in God comes rather of a light which God casts into the hearts of His servants, as a gift and a gratuity from Him. Sometimes this comes in the form of a proof that appears to one internally but which one cannot explain to others; sometimes it comes through visions in one's sleep; sometimes it comes by witnessing the ways of a religious man whose light is transferred to one upon befriending and spending time with him; and sometimes it comes by way of circumstantial considerations: a bedouin comes to the Prophet\* rejecting and condemning (his claim to prophethood), but when his eyes fall upon his radiant appearance, may God increase it in honour and nobility, and he sees the lights of prophethood sparkling therefrom, he says, 'By God, this is not the face of a liar.' Then he asks the Prophet to introduce him to Islam, at which time he becomes a Muslim.<sup>54</sup> Another man comes to the Prophet\* and says, 'In God's name I implore you, did God send you as a prophet?' The Prophet\* responds, 'Yes, indeed; I swear by God that He sent me as a prophet.' Convinced by this statement backed by this oath, the man accepts these words and becomes a Muslim.<sup>55</sup>

Such incidents and their like are too many to enumerate. And not one (of the protagonists in these reports) occupied himself with speculative theology or instruction on logical proofs. On the contrary, it was by way of the aforementioned accompaniments that the light of faith appeared like a white flash in their hearts. Then it continued to increase in intensity as a result of their witnessing memorable events, their reciting the Qur'ān, and their purifying their hearts.

Would that I knew when it had been related on the authority of the Prophet\* or the Companions, may God be pleased with them, that they brought forth a bedouin who accepted Islam upon it being stated to him, 'Proof that the world is temporal is that it is not devoid of accidents, and anything that is not devoid of temporal accidents is itself temporal,' or, 'God the Exalted knows by way of knowledge (as a distinct entity) and is powerful by a power that is additional to His essence, being neither Him nor other than Him,' and other such notions from the repertoire of the speculative theologians.

Now, I am not saying that these arguments or other expressions carrying the same meaning were never used. What I am saying is that every campaign (of the Prophet) produced, in addition to those uncivilized bedouin who embraced Islam under the shadow of the sword, a group of prisoners of war who individually embraced Islam, either after an extended period of time or shortly after their capture. And whenever any of these people uttered the Testimony of Faith (*shahāda*), they were taught the rules of ritual prayer (*ṣalāh*) and obligatory alms (*zakāh*) and promptly sent back to their livelihood in animal husbandry or whatever.

It is true, and I will not deny it, that the proofs cited by the speculative theologians may serve as a means to attaining faith in the case of some people. But the means to attaining faith are not limited to these. In fact, it is rare (that these proofs ever lead to faith). Instead, the type of discourse used in religious homilies (*ma'raḍ al-wa'z*), like that appearing in the Qur'ān, is far more effective.

As for that discourse executed after the fashion of the speculative theologians, it fills the souls of those who hear it with the sense that it is grounded in dialectics designed to silence the commoner, and this not because it is true in itself. In fact, it may even be a cause for stubbornness to take root in the commoner's heart. And for this reason, you do not see the sessions of disputation among the speculative theologians, nor those of the jurists, produce any instances of persons abandoning Mu'tazilism or some other unsanctioned innovation in favour of

some other view. Nor do you see this result in anyone abandoning the Shāfi‘ī school for the Ḥanafī school, or vice versa. These kinds of changes in affiliation take place for other reasons, including fighting with the sword.<sup>56</sup> And for this reason, it was not the habit of the Ancestors to proselytize through this kind of argumentation. Rather, they had harsh words for those who delved into speculative theology and busied themselves with (idle) inquiry and questioning.

In fact, were we ourselves to put aside all pretensions of deference and decorum, we would declare outright that delving into speculative theology, due to its many liabilities, is religiously forbidden (*ḥarām*), except for two persons: 1) A man whose heart develops doubts which neither simple religious homilies nor prophetic reports will remove. An argument based on speculative theology may serve to remove these doubts and provide a cure for his sickness. Thus, such arguments may be used to treat such a person. But care must be taken to ensure that he is only exposed to those arguments that are sound and do not carry the germ of the disease from which he suffers. For this presents the danger of stirring up ambiguity in his soul and arousing doubts which cause him sickness and disabuse him of his deeply-held sound beliefs. 2) A person of superior intelligence who is firmly grounded in religion and whose faith is reinforced by the light of certainty who wants to acquire this discipline in order to be able to treat those who fall sick with doubts, and in order to silence those who are given to unsanctioned innovation when they come upon the scene, and to guard his belief against the attempts by those who are steeped in unsanctioned innovation to seduce him. Learning this (discipline) with this aim in mind is a communal religious obligation (*farḍ kifāya*). And learning enough of it to be able to dispose of doubt and overcome specious arguments on dubious issues is a religious obligation upon each individual (*farḍ ‘ayn*), assuming that there is no other way to restore one’s deeply-held beliefs.

The plain truth is that everyone who firmly believes what the Messenger\* brought, including the contents of the Qur’ān, is a



Believer (*mu'min*), even if he does not know the proofs (that would substantiate this belief). By contrast, the faith that results from the proofs of speculative theology is extremely weak, subject to collapsing upon encountering the simplest sophism. Indeed, true faith (*al-īmān al-rāsikh*) is the faith of the masses that develops in their hearts from childhood due to their constant exposure (to religious material), or that accrues to them after they have reached the age of majority as a result of experiences that they cannot fully articulate. This faith is only perfected through constancy in religious devotions (*'ibādāt*) and remembrance of God (*dhikr*). Indeed, if a person is constant in worship to the point that he attains true God-consciousness (*taqwā*) and his soul is cleansed of the pollutants of this transient life and he achieves unfailing consistency in the remembrance of God, the light of gnosis (*ma'rifa*) will reveal itself to him such that matters that had been blindly accepted on faith become as if he sees and witnesses them (for himself). This is true gnosis, which obtains only after the fetters of formalized doctrine are undone and the bosom is expanded by the light of God the Exalted. 'And whomever God wants to guide He expands his bosom to (accept) submission to Him';<sup>57</sup> '...thus he is upon light from his Lord'.<sup>58</sup> Thus, when the Prophet\* was asked about the meaning of 'expanding the bosom', he said: 'A light that God casts into the heart of the faithful.' It was then asked, 'And what is its sign?' He responded, 'Turning away from the world of false delights and turning to the world of permanent duration.'<sup>59</sup> Thus we come to know that the speculative theologian who devotes himself to worldly indulgences, sparing nothing in the pursuit thereof, does not attain true gnosis. For had he attained it, he would have turned away from the world of false delights, absolutely.

### XIII

Perhaps you will say: You have derived (your definition of) Unbelief from the act of deeming anything in scripture to be a lie. But it is not the speculative theologian but the Prophet

himself,\* in his capacity as legislator, who narrowed the scope of God's mercy for His creation, when he said, 'God says to Adam\* on the Day of Judgement, "O Adam, send forth from your progeny the party of the Hellfire." To this Adam replies, "How many, my Lord?" God responds, "Nine hundred and ninety-nine out of every one thousand".'<sup>60</sup> He\* also said, 'My community will divide into seventy-odd sects, only one of which will be saved.'<sup>61</sup>

I respond: The first hadith is sound (*ṣahīḥ*), but the meaning it imparts is not that they are Unbelievers who will abide forever in the Hellfire. Rather, they will simply enter the Hellfire, be exposed to it and left there for a period commensurate with the magnitude of their sins. It is only one in a thousand, on the other hand, who enjoys divine protection from committing sin altogether. And it is in this vein that God the Exalted has said, 'And every one of you will arrive there.'<sup>62</sup> Moreover, 'party of the Hellfire' simply refers to those who *deserve* to be placed in the Hellfire because of the sins they commit. It does not preclude the possibility of their being diverted from the path to Hell by an act of intercession, as has been mentioned in a number of (prophetic) reports and to which many reports clearly testify, such reports being indicative of the magnitude of God's mercy. These reports are too many to enumerate. Among them, however, is a report narrated on the authority of 'Ā'isha, may God be pleased with her: 'One night I noticed that the Prophet\* was missing. So I searched for him and found him in a vestibule, praying. Upon his head I saw three lights. When he completed his prayer he said, "Who's there?" I replied, "Ā'isha, O messenger of God." "Did you see the three lights?" he asked. "Yes, messenger of God." Thereupon he said, "A visitor came to me from my Lord bearing the good news that God will cause seventy thousand people from my community to enter Paradise with no account of their deeds being taken and no punishment exacted from them. Then another visitor came in the second light and informed me that for every one of this seventy thousand God will cause seventy thousand from my community to enter Paradise with no account of their deeds being taken and no

punishment exacted from them. Then another visitor from my Lord came in the third light and informed me that for every one of this seventy thousand God will cause another seventy thousand from my community to enter Paradise with no account of their deeds being taken and no punishment exacted from them." To this I replied, "O messenger of God, your community will not reach this number." To this he answered, "It will be reached by including bedouin who neither fasted nor prayed."<sup>63</sup> Similar reports indicating the magnitude of God the Exalted's mercy are numerous.

Now, these reports refer exclusively to the community of Muhammad\*. But I say in addition that God's mercy will encompass many bygone communities as well, even if most of them may be briefly exposed to the Hellfire for a second or an hour or some period of time, by virtue of which they earn the title, 'party of the Hellfire'. In fact, I would say that, God willing, most of the Christians of Byzantium and the Turks of this age will be covered by God's mercy. I am referring here to those who reside in the far regions of Byzantium and Anatolia who have not come in contact with the message of Islam. These people fall into three categories: 1) A party who never heard so much as the name 'Muhammad'\*. These people are excused. 2) A party among those who lived in lands adjacent to the lands of Islam and had contact, therefore, with Muslims, who knew his name, his character, and the miracles he wrought. These are the blasphemous Unbelievers. 3) A third party whose case falls between these two poles. These people knew the name 'Muhammad,'\* but nothing of his character and attributes. Instead, all they heard since childhood was that some arch-liar carrying the name 'Muhammad' claimed to be a prophet, just as our children heard that an arch-liar and deceiver called 'al-Muqaffa'<sup>64</sup> falsely claimed that God sent him (as a prophet) and then challenged people to disprove his claim. This group, in my opinion, is like the first group. Even though they heard his name, they heard the opposite of what his true attributes were. And this does not provide enough incentive to compel them to investigate (his true status).

As for the other hadith, i.e., the one containing his statement, 'only one of them will be saved,' it has been narrated in different versions. One narration has 'only one of them will perish,' though the most popular version is the aforementioned one. Now, the meaning of 'saved' here is that they will not be exposed to the Hellfire and will have no need for intercession. For, anyone who is seized by the Attendants (*al-zabāniya*)<sup>65</sup> to be dragged to the Hellfire cannot be said to have been saved in any absolute sense, even if he is subsequently released from their grip through an act of intercession. Moreover, there is another version of the hadith that reads: 'all of them are in Paradise except the Crypto-infidels (*al-zanādiqa/s. zindīq*),' these being a sect (within the Muslim community). And it is possible that all of these narrations are sound, which would mean that 'those who perish (*al-hālika*)' refers to one group, namely those who dwell in the Hellfire permanently, 'one who perishes' referring to a person of whom there is no hope of reforming. For no good can be expected of him after he perishes. 'Those who are saved (*al-nājiya*),' meanwhile, would refer to another group, namely those who enter Paradise with no account of their deeds being taken and without (the need or benefit of any act of) intercession. For anyone who is made to account for his deeds has (in effect) been punished and thus cannot really be said to have been 'saved'.<sup>66</sup> Likewise, anyone who is subjected to having to rely on an act of intercession has been subjected to a level of humiliation by virtue of which he too cannot be said to have been 'saved' in any absolute sense.

These two destinies,<sup>67</sup> then, correspond to that of the best and that of the worst of creation. All of the rest of the groups fall somewhere between these two ends. Some of them will be punished purely on the basis of their record. Others will be brought to the brink of the Fire and then turned back through an act of intercession. Still others will (actually) enter the Hellfire and later exit therefrom at an interval commensurate with the extent of the erroneousness of their beliefs and unsanctioned innovations, as well as the plentitude or paucity of their sins. As for that group that will dwell in the Hellfire forever, it is simply

one group, namely those who deem the Prophet\* to be a liar and affirm the possibility that he may lie in pursuit of some (putative) common good (*maṣlaḥa*).

As for the rest of humanity, whoever, through diffuse and congruent reports, hears about the Prophet, his advent, his character, his miracles that defied the laws of nature—such as his splitting the moon, his causing pebbles to celebrate the praises of God, the springing forth of water from his fingers, and the inimitable Qur'ān with which he challenged the masters of eloquence, all of whom failed to match it—whoever hears all of this and then turns away from it, ignores it, fails to investigate it, refuses to ponder it, and takes no initiative to confirm it, such a person is a cynical (self-) deceiver (*kādhīb*). And he is also an Unbeliever. Most of the Byzantines and Turks, however, whose lands lie far beyond the lands of Islam, do not fall under this description.<sup>68</sup>

In fact, I might restate the matter in the following terms: Whoever hears all of this, if he is religious and not among those who prefer the life of this world to the Hereafter, he will almost certainly be motivated to investigate it in order to discern its truth-content. If he is not motivated, this will only be due to his attachment to this (fleeting) world and the lack of any (cosmic) fear on his part, along with a failure to appreciate the gravity of religion (*dīn*). This (lack of motivation) amounts in effect to an act of Unbelief. Similarly, if he is motivated but remiss in investigating the matter, this too amounts to an act of Unbelief. On the other hand, those possessed of faith in God and the Last Day, whatever religious community they might belong to, cannot betray this motivation (to investigate the claims of and about Muhammad) after coming into knowledge of these indications that were effected through miraculous means that defied the laws of nature. And should they, in all earnestness, take it upon themselves to investigate (this matter) and seek (the truth thereof) and then be overcome by death before being able to confirm this, they too shall be forgiven, by virtue of His all-encompassing mercy.



Think, then, of God's mercy as being as vast and as all-encompassing as it actually is. And do not measure divine issues with the adumbrative scales of formal reasoning. And know that the Hereafter is ever so close to this world. 'Both the creation and the resurrection of all of you are as that of a single soul.'<sup>69</sup> Just as most people in the world enjoy health and material well-being or live in enviable circumstances, inasmuch as, given the choice, they would choose life over death and annihilation, and just as it is rare for even a tormented person to wish for death, so too will it be rare for one to dwell in the Hellfire forever, compared to (the number of) those who will be saved outright and those who will ultimately be taken out of the Hellfire. And none of this, it should be noted, is a function of God's attribute of mercy having changed in any way due to changes in our circumstances. It is simply the fact of our being in this world or in the Hereafter that changes.<sup>70</sup> Otherwise, there would be no meaning to the statement of the Prophet\*: 'The first thing God inscribed in the First Book was, "I am God. There is no god but Me. My mercy outstrips my wrath. Thus, whoever says, 'There is no god but God and Muhammad is His servant and Messenger,' for him is Paradise.'"'<sup>71</sup> Moreover, you should know that the precedence and vastness of God's mercy has revealed itself to the people of spiritual insight through various means and illuminations other than the reports and anecdotes that have come into their possession. But citing all of this would take up too much time.

So delight in the good news of God's mercy and unconditional salvation if you combine faith with good deeds, and of unmitigated perdition if you are devoid of these. And if you are possessed of certainty in the basic tenets of faith but of errors in some of your figurative interpretations, or of doubt regarding either of these, or you combine good deeds with evil ones, then do not hope for unconditional salvation. But know that you stand between being punished for a period and then released, and being interceded for by the one in whose every utterance you have believed with certainty,<sup>72</sup> or by someone else.<sup>73</sup> So exert your every effort; perhaps through His grace

God will relieve you of the need for any intercessor. For at that stage the situation becomes grave indeed.

#### XIV

Some people think that one is adjudged an Unbeliever based on reason, not revelation, and that anyone who is ignorant of God is an Unbeliever, and that anyone who knows God is a Believer. To these people we say: 'Judging a person's blood to be licit and that they will dwell forever in the Hellfire is a legal ruling (*ḥukm shar'ī*) which has no meaning prior to the coming of revelation.' If, however, what they mean is that revelation is itself understood to indicate that anyone who is ignorant of God is an Unbeliever, then this inference of theirs should not be limited to the subject of God. Rather, a person who is ignorant of the Messenger or the Last Day should also be deemed an Unbeliever. Now, were they to limit their charge (of Unbelief) to cases of ignorance of God Himself, i.e., to a failure to acknowledge His existence or His oneness, and not extend this to His attributes, they might find support for such a position. But if those who err in the matter of the divine attributes are also considered ignorant (of God) or Unbelievers, this would compel us to condemn as Unbelievers anyone who denies the attributes of eternity and sempiternity (i.e., *qua* attributes), and anyone who denies the attribute of speech as an entity above and beyond the attribute of knowledge, and anyone who denies the attributes of hearing and seeing as entities above and beyond the attribute of knowledge, and anyone who denies the possibility of the beatific vision, and anyone who affirms (that God exists in) a particular direction, and anyone who affirms the existence of a temporal will that subsists neither in His essence nor in any other substrate, and anyone who holds the opposite of this view. In short, one would have to condemn as an Unbeliever anyone (who erred) on any question connected with the attributes of God. And this is a judgement for which there exists no evidence.

On the other hand, were we to restrict this rule to some of the divine attributes to the exclusion of others, we would find no basis for such a distinction. In sum, there is no sound basis upon which to proceed in such matters other than to take the act of deeming (Prophetic) statements to be lies (*takdhīb*) as the master principle. This enables us to include (on the one hand) those who deem the Prophet to be a liar or who deem the resurrection to be a lie and to exclude (on the other hand) those who engage in (legitimate) figurative interpretation.

To be sure, one will inevitably encounter dubious cases, such as those involving persons who appear to deem (Prophetic) statements to be lies or who adduce figurative interpretations that are questionable, as, for example, in the case of remote figurative interpretation. And in judging such cases one will have to rely upon probability (*ẓann*) and scholarly discretion (*ijtihād*). You already know, however, that these are matters that are open to scholarly discretion.

## XV

There are some who say, 'I simply brand as Unbelievers those groups who brand me an Unbeliever. Those who do not brand me an Unbeliever, I do not brand them so.' This position, however, is unfounded.

For were someone to say, 'Alī, may God be pleased with him, is most qualified to be Imām, assuming that he was not an Unbeliever,' then wrongly hold the latter to be an Unbeliever, though we hold to be an Unbeliever anyone who (on purely ideological grounds) challenges 'Alī's status (as an upright Companion), this person would not be so condemned, because his position would simply constitute an error (in his factual assessment) regarding a religiously relevant question. Similarly, if the Hanbalite is not deemed an Unbeliever because he holds God to be located in a specific direction, he cannot be branded an Unbeliever because he thinks or mistakenly holds those who deny God's being located in a specific direction to be guilty of

deeming (the Prophet) to be a liar rather than being engaged in (legitimate) figurative interpretation.

As for the statement of the Prophet,\* 'Whenever a Muslim charges his fellow Muslim with Unbelief, this redounds upon one of them,'<sup>74</sup> this refers to instances where he brands him an Unbeliever with full knowledge of his true state. In other words, if a person knows that another person believes that everything the Prophet\* brought is true and despite this he brands the latter an Unbeliever, he becomes himself an Unbeliever. As for his branding this person an Unbeliever because he sincerely thinks that the latter holds the Prophet to be a liar, this is simply a mistake on his part regarding this particular individual. For he may think that this person is indeed an Unbeliever who holds the Prophet to be a liar, while in fact this is not the case. This, however, does not constitute an act of Unbelief.

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Through these reiterations, then, we have drawn your attention to the deepest depths of the Maxim (of refraining from condemning the people of Islam) and to the Rule (governing figurative interpretation) that you should follow. So content yourself with this. Peace.

## NOTES

1. A reference to Qur'ānic depictions of the pre-Islamic Arabs' derision of the Prophet Muhammad. See, e.g., 15: 6, 37: 36, 44: 14, 68: 2, and *passim*.
2. Part of several verses in the Qur'ān, e.g., 6: 25, 8: 31, 16: 24, 27: 68, and *passim*.
3. Al-Ghazālī's imagery here is inspired by the famous Verse of Light from Qur'ān 24: 35: 'God is the light of the heavens and the earth. The likeness of His light is as that of a niche within which rests a lamp. The lamp is encased in glass. The glass (in its brilliance) is as a pearly star, ignited by a blessed olive tree, neither eastern nor western, its oil virtually glowing though fire touches it not. Light upon light; God

guides to His light whomsoever He pleases. And God strikes similitudes to humanity, while God is knowledgeable of all things.'

4. See, *Ihyā'*, 1: 120: 'By *malakūt* I mean the invisible world that is apprehended through the light of insight and the heart.'
5. Abū Bakr b. 'Alī b. al-Ṭayyib al-Bāqillānī (d. 403/1013), a Mālikī jurist and rationalist theologian, was a pupil of Abū al-'Abbās b. Mujaḥhid al-Tā'ī, who was himself a pupil of the founder of the Ash'arite school, Abū al-Ḥasan 'Alī al-Ash'arī. See, *EII*, 1: 603-4. Ibn Taymiya, incidentally, is reported to have held al-Bāqillānī to have been 'the best of the Ash'arī *mutakallimūn*, unrivalled by any predecessor or successor.' See, *EI2*, 1: 959.
6. Abū al-Ḥasan 'Alī al-Ash'arī (260/873-4 – 324/935), ■ descendent of the Companion Abū Mūsā al-Ash'arī, and eponym of the Ash'arite school of theology. Born in Baṣra, he was a devoted student of the Mu'tazilite theologian al-Jubbā'ī, though he subsequently broke with the latter, reportedly around 300/912-13, and turned against the Mu'tazilites. He is credited with having legitimized the methodology of the Mu'tazilites by turning it to the defence of what would come to be established as orthodox views. See, *EII*, 1: 480-1; *EI2*, 1: 694-5.
7. Abū 'Alī al-Ḥusayn b. 'Alī b. Yazīd al-Muhallabī al-Karābīsī, a traditionist, theologian, and *faqīh*, originally a partisan of the *ahl al-ra'y*, he later joined the circle of al-Shāfi'ī (d.204/819) when the latter came to Baghdād. He died in 245/859 or 248/862. See, *EI2*, 4: 596.
8. Abū 'Abbās al-Qalānisī was apparently ■ Shāfi'ī jurist and 'Ash'arite' theologian, perhaps even ■ student of al-Ash'arī. Al-Baghdādī cites him profusely in *Uṣūl al-dīn* and refers to him as 'one of our scholars'. Curiously, however, I have not been able to locate him in the biographical sources. Nor is there an entry on him in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*.
9. In other words, if he is to follow him in his doctrine, there is no need to go beyond this to proofs, since the requirement to follow renders proof superfluous. Furthermore, this 'proof' could not really be a proof if one is obligated to follow it whether one is convinced of it or not. For more on this point, see, *Ihyā'*, 1: 94 (line 10-11).
10. Earlier, the Ḥanafī jurist al-Jaṣṣāṣ (d. 370/980) had explained in his treatment of the hadith, 'I have been commanded to wage war on the people until they say, "There is no god but God..."', that this applied only to the pagan associationists (*mushrikīn*), not to Jews and Christians. For the latter already acknowledge, in principle at least, the truth of the statement, 'There is no god but God.' What renders them Unbelievers (*kāfirs*) is their rejection of the prophethood of Muhammad. For this reason, according to al-Jaṣṣāṣ, Jews and Christians do not have to be fought until they say that there is no god but God, and if a Jew or Christian acknowledges the prophethood of Muhammad (with all that



this entails in terms of following the latter's *sharī'a*) he or she becomes thereby a Muslim. See, Abū Bakr Aḥmad b. 'Alī al-Rāzī al-Jaṣṣāṣ, *Aḥkām al-qur'ān*, 3 vols., ed. 'Abd al-Salām Muḥammad 'Alī Shāhīn (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiya, 1415/1994), 2: 310-11.

11. 'Deists' is my rendering of the Arabic *al-Barāhima*. In the early doxographical works, the *Barāhima* are said to have believed in God, and even in His oneness (*tawḥīd*), but to have rejected the idea that God sends prophets. (See, e.g., al-Baghdādī, *Uṣūl al-dīn* 26ff.) According to al-Ghazālī, 'They said that no benefit derives from sending them (the prophets), since reason dispenses with the need for them'. See, *Iḥyā'*, 1:112. My use of the term 'deism' (from the Latin *deus*, a god, God) is based on the meaning given it by the 16th-century Swiss theologian P. Viret, who used it as a term of opprobrium against people who, 'in contrast to the atheists, believed in God but accepted nothing of Christ and his teachings'. See, *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, vol. 1, ed. E. Fahlbusch et al. (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Press, 1999), p. 788. Later, the term 'deism' came to represent a philosophical position, according to which God was the Creator but did not intervene in nature or history. The world, in other words, was likened to a clock: once put into motion, it could run perfectly well without any need of its maker. See, *ibid*.
12. Cf. *al-Iqtīṣād*, 120: 'Atheists are more worthy than Deists of being deemed Unbelievers, because in addition to deeming the prophets to be liars they reject the One Who sends the prophets.'
13. This is a reference to the permissibility of declaring war (*jihād*), i.e., as an act regulated by Islamic law, against such groups, not, *pace* Watt (*Muslim Intellectual*, 115), to any right to shed their blood at will in civil society. Muslim jurists agree unanimously that Jewish and Christian citizens of a Muslim state are inviolable, as protected minorities (*ahl al-dhimma*). And while all but the Ḥanafis hold a Muslim's murder of a Jew or Christian to be a civil offence for which the victim's family can only demand blood money (as opposed to execution, as would be the case were the victim a Muslim), if a Muslim targets a Jew or Christian merely *because* s/he is a Jew or a Christian, as opposed, say, to settling some personal dispute or carrying out some crime of passion, most jurists, including the staunch Ibn Taymīya, held that such a murder constituted a criminal offence for which the Muslim was to be executed under the law of *ḥirāba*. For more on this point, see, my 'Domestic Terrorism in the Islamic Legal Tradition,' *The Muslim World*, vol. 91, no. 3-4 (Fall, 2001): 293-318. For the view of Ibn Taymīya in particular, see, *Majmū' fatāwā*, 28: 311.
14. Al-Ghazālī's use of *mushrik* (associationist) here appears to be somewhat out of place. What he might have in mind is the idea that all of these groups seek in some sense to extract service from nature via

supernatural, as opposed to scientific, means (e.g., by their various rituals and acts of worship) on the basis of beliefs about the supernatural which could only be authenticated by information brought by the prophets from God. By rejecting the prophets, therefore, these groups directly or indirectly attribute the capacity to identify supernatural ways and means of extracting service from nature to an entity other than God, whence their associationism.

15. 19:17. This is a reference to the angel Gabriel's appearing to Mary, the mother of Jesus.
16. *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 9: 653 (*Kitāb al-ta'bir*). Abū Hurayra reports: I heard the Prophet\* say, 'Whoever sees me in his sleep (*manām*) will see me in ■ state of full wakefulness; for Satan cannot assume my image.'
17. Literally, 'a spirit' (*rūḥ*) after the fashion of Aristotle, who explained the growth of plants by what he termed the 'vegetative soul,' whose functional nature it was to cause change in bodies. See, Hartshorne, *Insights*, 41.
18. *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 6: 448-9 (*Kitāb al-tafsīr*): Abū Sa'īd al-Khudrī reports; 'The Messenger of God\* said, "Death will be brought forth in the form of ■ black and white ram, and a crier will call out, 'O people of Paradise,' at which time they will stand up on their toes to see (what is going on). He will say, 'Do you know who this is?' They will say, 'Yes, this is death,' all of them having seen it. Then the crier will call out, 'O people of Hell,' at which time they will stand up on their toes to see (what is going on). He will say, 'Do you know who this is?' They will say, 'Yes, this is death,' all of them having seen it. Then it will be slain, and it will be said, 'O people of Paradise, eternal dwelling and no death; and O people of Hell, eternal dwelling and no death.'" Then he (the Prophet) recited the verse, "And warn them of the Day of Gathering, when the affair will have been determined even as they were steeped in heedlessness." Those steeped in heedlessness are the worldly people (*ahl al-dunyā*) who did not have faith.'
19. Ibid., 9: 751 (*Kitāb al-i'tisām*), part of a lengthy hadith reported by Anas b. Mālik on the authority of the Prophet: '...by Him in whose hands rests my soul, Paradise and Hell were presented to me inside this wall while I was praying. And I have never seen the likes of the good and the evil I saw this day.'
20. For ■ similar report, see, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* (*Kitāb al-īmān*), 1: 134, on the authority of Ibn 'Abbās: '...as if I were looking at Jonah, the son of Matthew, upon him be peace, mounted on a ruddy, curly-haired she-camel, wearing a long woollen outer garment, the halter of his she-camel being made of date-palm hemp, he uttering all the while, "At your command".'
21. For a report imparting essentially the same meaning, see, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 9: 822 (*Kitāb al-tawḥīd*): 'Abd Allāh reports that the

Prophet\* said: "The last person to exit the Hellfire and enter Paradise is a man who comes out crawling. His Lord says to him, 'Enter Paradise,' to which the man responds, 'My Lord, Paradise is full.' This exchange is repeated three times, the man insisting each time that Paradise is full. At this point God says to him, 'For you shall be the equivalent of this world ten times over.'"

22. Al-Subkī cites this as one of the hadiths for which he could find no chain. See, *Ṭabaqāt*, 6: 374.
23. Al-'Irāqī notes that al-Ṭabarānī and Abū Nu'aym had related this hadith through two weak chains. See, *al-Asfār*, 1: 83. Meanwhile, Ibn Taymiya insisted that this hadith was fabricated, citing several hadith experts, including al-Dārimī (d. 280/893), Ibn Hibbān (d. 354/965), al-'Uqaylī (d. 322/933), and Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1200), to back his claim. See, his *al-Radd 'alā al-mantiqiyīn (Refutation of the Logicians)*, 2 vols., ed. Muḥammad 'Abd al-Sattār Naṣṣār (Cairo: Maktabat al-Azhar, n.d.), 1: 344-6. R. Frank identifies 'intellect' here with the Neoplatonic 'Agent Intellect'. See, *Ghazālī*, 27.
24. Wensinck, *Mu'jam al-mufahras*, 2: 81, reports that Abū Dā'ūd related this hadith in the chapter, *Kitāb al-sunna*.
25. Al-'Irāqī (*al-Asfār*, 1: 103) reports that al-Tirmidhī deemed this hadith sound on the authority of Ibn 'Umar.
26. Ibid. (1: 102) reports that Muslim related this on the authority of Ibn 'Umar.
27. Al-Subkī (*Ṭabaqāt*, 6: 291, 6: 346) cites this among those hadiths for which he could find no chain. Al-'Irāqī, meanwhile, (op. cit. 1: 103) reports that Aḥmad had related it on the authority of Abū Hurayra through reporters, all of whom were reliable. One wonders if al-Subkī's well-known anti-Ḥanbalite biases did not get the better of him here.
28. At *Ihyā'*, 1: 103, al-Ghazālī states that the Ash'arites limited the use of figurative interpretation to reports about the divine attributes, accepting reports about matters of the Afterlife according to their apparent meaning. On this score, they were in agreement with the Ḥanbalites. The Mu'tazilites, meanwhile, went beyond the divine attributes and figuratively interpreted a number of reports regarding the Afterlife, e.g., the punishment in the grave, the Scale (*mīzān*), and the Path (*ṣirāt*), thus parting with both the Ḥanbalites and the Ash'arites. At the same time, the Mu'tazilites accepted other reports about the Afterlife as constituting literal truth, e.g., bodily resurrection, sentient pleasures, and punishments. It was here, according to al-Ghazālī, that they parted with the generality of the philosophers.
29. Confirmed at *Ihyā'*, 1: 114 (line 7ff.).
30. I.e., the example of Ibn Ḥanbal resorting to figurative interpretations based on noetic and analogous levels of existence shows that he accepted these two forms. Ash'arites and Mu'tazilites, meanwhile, clearly engage

in figurative interpretation based on conceptual and sensory existence. All groups obviously subscribe to literal interpretation. Cf., however, Ibn Taymiya, who would later insist that it was only the rationalists, and particularly a party of Ash'arites, following the demise of Mu'tazilism, who upheld the propriety of figurative interpretation (*ta'wīl*). See, e.g., my 'Ibn Taymiya on Trial in Damascus,' *Journal of Semitic Studies*, vol. 39, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 51-3 and *passim*.

31. I.e., up, down, front, back, left, and right.
32. For an edited version of this work, see, al-Ghazālī, *al-Quṣur al-'awālī*, ed. M.M. Abū al-'Alā' (Cairo: Maktabat al-Jundī, n.d.), 9-80.
33. Ed. R. al-'Ajam (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr al-Lubnānī, 1994).
34. 6:78.
35. Cf., however, Abū Muḥammad 'Alī b. Aḥmad b. Sa'id Ibn Ḥazm, *Kitāb al-fiṣl fī al-mīlāl wa al-ahwā' wa al-nihāl*, 4 vols. (Cairo: Maktabat al-Salām al-'Ālamīya, n.d.), 4: 5, where the author, his literalist Zāhirism notwithstanding, condemns as an Unbeliever (*kāfir*) anyone who interprets these verses literally and concludes that Abraham took the sun, stars, and moon to be his god.
36. 6: 75.
37. See, e.g., Qur'ān, 93: 7, where the Prophet Muhammad is reminded, 'And did He not find you drifting in error and then guide you?'
38. 6: 75.
39. 20: 12.
40. 20: 69.
41. This designation actually applied to several groups, including the Khurrāmites, the Qarmatians, and the Ismā'īlīs, the last two being the most important. It did not denote any particular school or specific body of doctrines so much as an orientation, namely, that which insisted on there being a hidden meaning behind every apparent one, particularly in the case of scripture, and the notion that the only reliable knowledge was that imparted by an infallible teacher. Al-Ghazālī wrote an entire work against the Bāṭinites entitled *Faḍā'ih al-bāṭiniya* (*Scandals of the Bāṭinites*), at the behest of the 'Abbāsīd Caliph al-Mustazhirī, as an apparent counter to the Fāṭimids and their Ismā'īlī Caliph in Cairo. In his '*Qisṭās al-mustaḥīm*', meanwhile, he referred to them as *ta'limiya*, or *ahl al-ta'lim*, a designation, according to al-Shahrastānī, by which Bāṭinite groups were referred to in Khurāsān. See, *EII*, 1: 679. See also, *al-Qisṭās*, 9, where al-Ghazālī says that he was prompted to write this work by a question from one of 'the people of infallible instruction' (*ahl al-ta'lim*).
42. See, Qur'ān, 20: 85-7.
43. Mu'tazilism being apparently the lowest level of acceptable theological doctrine.

44. According to al-‘Ajlūnī, al-Sha‘rānī related a similar hadith, the latter part of which read, ‘all of them will be in Paradise except one’. He notes that the ‘ulamā’ had identified this ‘one’ as the *zanādiqa*. He goes on, however, to indicate that he read on the margin of al-Sha‘rānī’s *Mizān* another version of the hadith, in the words quoted by al-Ghazālī, (i.e., all of them will enter Paradise except the Crypto-infidels) on the authority of Anas b. Mālīk from the Prophet. He says that Ibn Hajar related the hadith according to this wording in his *Takhrīj aḥādīth musnad al-firdaws*. See, Ismā‘īl b. Muḥammad al-‘Ajlūnī, *Kashf al-khafā’ wa muzīl al-ilbās ‘ammā ishtahara min al-aḥādīth ‘alā alsinat al-nās*, 2 vols. (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 1351/1931), 1: 150.
45. Abū Bakr ‘Abd al-Rahmān Ibn Kaysān al-Aṣamm (d. 200-1/816-18), a famous Mu‘tazilite theologian, exegete, and jurist. See, al-Murtaḍā, *Ṭabaqāt al-mu‘tazila*, 56-7. See also, al-Baghdādī, *Uṣūl al-dīn*, 271, where he confirms al-Aṣamm’s rejection of the obligation to establish a Caliphate: ‘al-Aṣamm claimed that were the people to desist from wronging each other, they would be freed of any need for a Caliph (*Imām*).’
46. See, Qur’ān, 24: 11-20 esp. 24: 11.
47. Ibrāhīm b. Sayyār b. Hānī’ b. Iṣḥāq al-Nazzām (d. between 220 and 230/835-45), a famous Mu‘tazilite theologian, was raised in Baṣra but spent the last part of his life in Baghdād, where he died. He studied in the circle of the Mu‘tazilite Abū Hudhayl al-‘Allāf, but then broke away to form an independent school. See, *EII*, 3: 892-3.
48. Ahmad Karamustafa treats what are apparently later manifestations of this same trend. Of the Malāmitīya Sufis, for example, he writes: ‘The Malāmitī’s main concern was to hide his inner state from others for fear that an ostentatious display of piety would lead to overindulgence in the self and ultimately to self-complacency, thus distancing the believer from God. It was because of his painstaking endeavor to conceal the true nature of his religiosity that he sought to incur public blame by deliberately transgressing the limits of social and legal acceptability.’ See, A.T. Karamustafa, *God’s Unruly Friends: Dervish Groups in the Islamic Later Middle Period 1200-1500* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1994), 36.
49. See above, note 13.
50. Al-Ghazālī seems to be pointing to a basic difference between legal and theological deliberations. In the former, one may be justified, if not compelled in certain instances (in the interest of maintaining order and quelling disputes over time-sensitive rights), to rely on weak, multivalent, or even dubious sources. In theology, however, there is no compelling interest that would justify or necessitate passing judgements on people on the basis of weak or multivalent sources.



51. What al-Ghazālī is referring to here is the fact that, in many if not most instances, what is taken to be consensus merely amounts to an *absence of any knowledge of disagreement*, which is significantly less reliable and certainly not the same as all those concerned positively expressing their agreement on a point. For more on this point, *see*, my *State*, xxxiii-xxxiv.
52. Aḥmad b. al-Ḥasan b. Sahl Abū Bakr al-Fārisī. A jurisconsult of the Shāfi'ī school, he is reported to have studied with the likes of al-Muzanī and Ibn Surayj. The book to which al-Ghazālī is referring is most likely his '*Uyūn al-masā'il*'. There is some controversy over his death-date: al-Subkī reports that some held it to be 305/922; but he himself says that it had to have been after 341/952, based on comments he read in a manuscript of '*Uyūn al-masā'il*'. *See*, *Ṭabaqāt*, 2: 184-6. *See also*, however, al-Ziriklī, *al-A'lām*, 1: 114, who gives a death-date of 300/917.
53. Al-Ghazālī is referring here to the type of training in logic and related subjects that would enable one to construct the demonstrative tests to the end of applying the criterion he has laid out, this type of training typically falling outside the general curriculum of the *madrasa* system.
54. I have not been able to locate such a hadith with a bedouin protagonist. However, Imām Aḥmad relates the following on the authority of the Jewish convert 'Abd Allāh b. Sallām: 'When the Prophet\* came to Medina, the people withdrew in fear, and I was among those who withdrew in fear. But when I was able to take a clear look at his face, I said, "This is not the face of a liar"...' *See*, *Musnad al-Imām Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal*, 6 vols. (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī li al-Ṭibā'a wa al-Nashr, Dār Ṣādir li al-Ṭibā'a wa al-Nashr, n.d.), 5: 451.
55. *See*, e.g., *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 1: 97 (*Kitāb al-'ilm*), for a much longer hadith, including the gist of what al-Ghazālī relates here.
56. Rather than promoting the view that violence can instil belief, al-Ghazālī seems to be referring here to the fact that changes of heart sometimes result from a certain seriousness and humility that accompanies the act of putting one's life on the line.
57. 6: 125.
58. 39:22. Cf. *Iḥyā'*, 1: 93, for a more detailed statement to this effect.
59. *al-Asfār*, 1: 76, reports that al-Tirmidhī and al-Bayhaqī report this on the authority of Ibn Mas'ūd.
60. Essentially the same meaning is reflected in a lengthy hadith in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 4: 595 (*Kitāb al-anbiyā'*); Abū Sa'īd al-Khudrī reports on the authority of the Prophet: 'God the Exalted says to Adam, "O Adam," to which the latter responds, "Your wish and your command, and all goodness is in Your Hands." God then says, "Send forth the contingent of Hell." Adam responds, "And what is the contingent of Hell?" (God says,) "From every thousand, nine hundred and ninety-nine," at

which point the hair of young persons turns grey and every pregnant female miscarries her foetus and the people appear to be drunk but they are not drunk; nay, the punishment of God is severe...'

61. Wensinck, *Mu'jam al-mufahras*, 5: 135-6, cites several such hadith.
62. 19: 71.
63. At *Ihyā'*, 4:531, al-Ghazālī cites a similar hadith on the authority of 'Amr b. Ḥazm al-Anṣārī, the end of which reads, 'O Lord, will my community reach this number?' to which God responds, 'I will fill it by drawing from the bedouin.' Al-'Irāqī says that al-Bayhaqī had related such a hadith in his section on the Resurrection and Judgement. He also notes that Aḥmad and al-Ṭabarānī relate it via weak chains. In *Takhrīj aḥādith ihyā' 'ulūm al-dīn* (ed. Abū 'Abd Allāh b. Maḥmūd b. Muḥammad [Riyādh: Dār al-'Āṣima li al-Nashr, 1408/1987], 6: 2810-13), several other comparable hadith are mentioned. None of them, however, include the phrase, 'bedouin who neither prayed nor fasted'. Also, 'seventy' was used by the Arabs to connote an extremely large, indeterminable number, tantamount in many ways to such English colloquialisms as 'zillion'.
64. A reference to 'Abd Allāh Ibn al-Muqaffa' (d. ca. 139/756), a Persian convert to Islam who rose to the office of Secretary of State under the Umayyads and was executed around the age of thirty-six (most likely for political reasons) under the early 'Abbasid governor of Baṣra, Sufyān b. Mu'āwīya al-Muhallabī. An accomplished man of letters, Ibn al-Muqaffa' was known for his translations into Arabic (most notably *Kalīla wa dimna*) and for his contributions to the development of Arabic prose. He was also known for his attachment to Manichean beliefs and was suspected of *zandaqa*, a charge apparently confirmed – and this is the point of al-Ghazālī's statement here—by his criticisms of the Qur'ān and the Prophet Muhammad which resulted in an attempt to produce a rival 'scripture'. See, *EI2*, 3: 883-5. For a brief statement on his attempt to rival the Qur'ān, see, J. Van Ess, 'Some Fragments of the *Mu'araḍat al-Qur'ān* Attributed to Ibn al-Muqaffa', *Studia Arabica et Islamica: Festschrift for Ihsan Abbas on his Sixtieth Birthday*, ed. W. al-Qaḍī (Beirut: American University in Beirut Press, 1981), 151-63.
65. A reference to the angels mentioned in Qur'ān, 96: 18.
66. Perhaps a reference to a hadith recorded in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (*Kitāb al-raqāq*) 9: 493-4: 'Whoever is made to account for his record of deeds is (effectively) being punished...'
67. I.e., entering Paradise with no account being taken, on the one extreme, and being cast into the Hellfire to dwell therein forever, on the other.
68. At the time of al-Ghazālī's writing, the Great Seljuqs were still establishing themselves in Anatolia and the Ottomans had not yet come on the scene.
69. 31:28.

70. In other words, it is through the same mercy by virtue of which most people enjoy health and relative prosperity in this world that most people, speaking again in relative terms, will enter Paradise in the Hereafter.
71. Al-Burhān Fūrī reports that this hadith was related on the authority of Ibn 'Abbās. *See*, 'Alā' al-Dīn 'Alī al-Muttaqī b. Ḥusām al-Dīn al-Hindī al-Burhān Fūrī, *Kanz al-'ummāl fī sunan al-aqwāl wa al-af'āl*, 19 vols. (Hyderabad: Jam'iyat Dā'irat al-Ma'ārif al-'Uthmāniya, 1364/1945), 1: 44.
72. I.e., the Prophet.
73. I.e., such as an extremely pious and right-believing person (*walī*/ pl. *awliyā'*).
74. *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 1: 78-9 (*Bab ḥāl man qāla li akhihi al-muslim yā kāfir*).



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